

EXAMPLES OF ONLINE PARTICIPATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN UN PROCESSES

COVID-19 has challenged and changed established modes of civil society engagement with UN processes. Online formats have the potential to bring to the table diverse voices, including previously excluded ones, who otherwise would not be part of UN processes. Yet, the transition from largely offline to almost fully virtual engagement has not been smooth throughout.

OHCHR and the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology have conducted an informal mapping of UN practices related to online civil society engagement and participation, based on publicly available information¹ and mostly looking at HQ/intergovernmental processes, and identified some good examples and trends, based on key areas², which showed that:

- (1) While limitations on access to the internet and other (technical, security and policy) challenges related to online participation still constitute obstacles for many, digital platforms overall have expanded the reach of UN processes and connect intergovernmental forums with grassroots actors.
- (2) Pre-existing offline requirements, including the need to have ECOSOC consultative status to engage with and participate in UN processes³, equally restrict meaningful and inclusive civil society participation in many online meetings.

Access to information

- Generally, relevant information regarding UN processes, including conferences, webinars, forums, and meetings can be accessed in multiple UN languages on home pages of respective agencies or on independent event websites;
- The social media channel most commonly used for announcing events and posting updates is Twitter, with other social media channels used less often;
- Insufficient information was available publicly in relation to modalities of participation in informal negotiations on draft resolutions of inter-governmental bodies.
- Despite many ongoing processes to update UN websites, it appears that information provided is not fully tailored to the needs of persons with disabilities as required by existing guidelines.⁴

Examples:

The Secretariat of the Human Rights Council used the Sched mobile app, as a preliminary measure, to disseminate information and schedules of the HRC daily agenda items and informal consultations on the draft resolutions (including the date, time, organizing member States, and contact details).

A few processes such as the [Commission on the Status of Women](#) (appears to also apply to online meetings), [UNECA](#) and the [UN Food Systems Pre-Summit](#) mentioned participation provided brief guidance on participation to persons with disabilities, however, actual modalities of participation was not made public and had to be specifically requested through a given contact.

Challenges reported by civil society:

- Delayed decisions about session dates, participation modalities, agenda, reduced the time CSOs had to prepare and engage meaningfully;
- Limited or no guidance or information on participation in informal negotiations on draft resolutions.

¹ The information publicised on entities' web-pages on online engagement modalities does not cover all issues, thus we reflected some common challenges reported by civil society in separate text boxes

² Questions are based on [OHCHR's Five Stepping Stones](#), and the [High Commissioner's report to the HRC \(A/HRC/44/25\)](#)

³ For example, see the reports of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (A/HRC/38/18, A/HRC/44/25), and the reports of the Secretary-General on [intimidation and reprisals for cooperation with the UN](#)

⁴ For example: [UN Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(The P.O.U.R. Principles\)](#), see also [Secretary-General's 2021 Report on the Disability Inclusion in the UN System](#)

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UNOCT launched [Connect & Learn platform](#), which seeks to enable users to connect through inclusive collaboration and discussion in thematic communities of practice and to learn through an eLearning section with courses and modules.

Challenges reported by civil society:

- Information on registration and accreditation is not provided in a timely manner;
- No feedback mechanisms when registration and/or accreditation are denied.

Registration

- Most entities communicated relevant instructions and deadlines for registration and disseminated agendas and details of speakers before the online events;
- Identity verification of accredited civil society representatives in an online mode poses technical challenges, based on some concerns reported within the UN system;
- There appear not to be any formal channels for contesting restrictions on and/or rejection of registration and accreditation requests.

Examples:

[UNESCAP and the UN Network on Migration](#) put forward clear timelines for the Asia-Pacific Regional Review of Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in March 2021 in Bangkok, including extended deadlines to allow all stakeholders to submit their applications for hosting side events.

Participation in meetings

- Modalities for taking the floor varied across different UN entities and events, but guided by “first come first served” principle;
- Across UN entities and processes, written and oral statements had to be submitted electronically in conformity with specified guidelines, including the length of written and oral statements (e.g. 2–3 minutes for oral statements).
- Some virtual events had simultaneous interpretation into sign language and caption services as well as live broadcast via Facebook, YouTube, and UN WebTV;
- While the requirement for ECOSOC consultative status continued to restrict participation of grassroots civil society in many intergovernmental online meetings, some forums allowed access.

Examples:

UNESCO's Extended 44th session of the [World Heritage Committee](#) and [UNECA's Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development](#) considered different time zones when organizing events.

[UNHCR's Regional Consultations with NGOs in 2021](#) were conducted in seven regions to allow civil society participation from different time zones.

Challenges reported by civil society:

- Less space for civil society due to reduced speaking slots, speaking time and possibilities to interact with delegations;
- Different time zones constitute barriers for participation in remote meetings;
- Limited transparency in relation to decision-making, in particular when adopted through silent procedure;
- Not all meetings were live streamed;
- Limited diversity of civil society in the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development as only a few pre-selected speakers were allowed;
- Lack of interpretation, sign language, subtitles, and audio description for persons with disabilities;
- Technical challenges related to video and audio participation (e.g. sound quality concerns, slow bandwidth and time for uploading video statements).

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Challenges reported by civil society:

- Insufficient information about side events on official web-sites;
- No formal virtual platforms for civil society side events, decreasing their visibility and impact;
- Limitations on the number of virtual side events civil society can organize.

Side events

- Across most UN entities civil society were required to submit applications for hosting a side event to a specified email address or a link; guidance generally included information about criteria, format, themes, deadlines, and platforms;
- In most cases, civil society were requested to use online platforms of their choosing, or use more than one platform, ranging from Zoom, MS Teams, WebEx to other platforms;
- In most contexts, UN entities continued to facilitate the organization of online side events and the dissemination of related information, as they would normally do in an offline mode;
- Generally, civil society organizers of side events bore responsibility for the content of the side events (including promotional material such as flyers).

Examples:

Under the Commission on the Status of Women the [NGO CSW Forum](#) provides a platform for civil society, including those without ECOSOC status to engage, which enabled over 27,000 participants to join more than 700 NGO parallel events during the CSW65.

The [2021 High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development](#) provided a link for all questions related to side events to allow interested civil society actors to directly contact the organizers of the forum.

The [64th Session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs \(CND\)](#), 12-16 April 2021, provided information regarding online side events, and a list of virtual side events and relevant links on its website.

Safety and security

- Event organizers and entities generally did not issue privacy notes or provide information regarding the safety and security of the data collected during virtual events.

Examples:

During the hybrid event of United Nations Food System [Pre-Summit \(UNFSS\)](#) hosted by FAO in July 2021, relevant security information and terms of reference about the virtual platform were provided, including the collection of information based on the prior consent by participants.

Challenges reported by civil society:

- Insufficiently clear and accessible information and guidance on the safety and security of virtual meetings;
- While digital meetings expand participation for some, they could increase the risk of online reprisals.

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Online feedback channels

- A number of entities put in place innovative feedback channels/platforms for civil society to contribute to processes, going beyond specific meetings, through polls, surveys, and submitting issues papers;
- No public information was available on formal and established online feedback channels for civil society to contest decisions restricting access to information and participation, but most entities provided generic email contact addresses for civil society queries;
- Limited or no information on how civil society could participate in decisions on online participation modalities and which online tools/platform would be used.

Examples:

The Secretary-General's Report on "Common Agenda" builds on many of the ideas that emerged during the [year-long "listening exercise"](#) conducted in the context of the 75th anniversary of the UN, in which more than 1.5 million people across all countries have participated.

The [Internet Governance Forum 2021](#), following its practice of previous years, invited all its stakeholders to submit inputs to the thematic focus of the 2021 annual IGF meeting programme, which fed into open consultations and Multistakeholder Advisory Group meetings of the 2021 IGF preparatory process.

[ITU's WSIS Forum crowdsources](#) the Forum's agenda, themes and programme in an open online consultation process.

[UNAIDS employed a multi-stakeholder approach](#) during the preparation of the High-Level Meeting on HIV in June 2021, with a special effort to reach out to people living with HIV, including youths, women, indigenous people, sex workers, LGBTQ, faith-based organizations, and private sector bodies.

FAO involved different groups, including civil society, to contribute to the Pre-Summit through [Action Tracks](#) public forums, [Food Systems Summit Dialogues](#), and the [Community platform](#).

The [Secretariat of the Human Rights Council](#) has a dedicated email address to share information with NGOs engaging with the Council, and to address any concerns in relation to their engagement with the Council. The Council also frequently organizes meetings with NGOs to enhance dialogue and cooperation.

[UNDP's Spark Blue platform](#), also utilized by other UN entities (for example: [FAO](#), [UNESCO](#), [WHO](#), [OHCHR](#)), allows civil society to directly contribute to online discussions in a "collective intelligence" type of engagement. Information related to events, dates, registration and participation modalities and safety and security, is provided by the entity organizing a particular event, and practices may vary from entity to entity.

Furthermore, [UNDP's 2021 Global SDG week](#) (16-27 September 2021), calls the public (organizations and individuals) to add their voices and share their work on advocacy and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals using [the SDG Global Heat Map](#). One click directs users to the global location where advocates are based including a visual representation of what they are working on.

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CHECKLIST FOR MEANINGFUL AND INCLUSIVE CIVIL SOCIETY ON-LINE PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING IN INTER-GOVERNMENTAL CONTEXTS



THROUGHOUT the process pay attention to:

- **Using accessible platforms**
- **Digital security**
- **Interpretation and sign-language**
- **Financially support internet access where needed**
- **Combine different meeting modalities (e.g. look at hybrid models)**
- **Create regional hubs to include people who may not be able to access the internet**

AGENDA SETTING:

- Transparent rules and procedures, including on roles of different actors
- Relevant information accessible in different languages through different channels, including social media, accessible web-sites, accessibility for persons with disabilities (e.g. sign language, captioning)
- Proactive out-reach to specific affected communities, through appropriate and easily accessible channels
- Formal or informal consultations online or offline/hearings/dialogues at different levels (e.g. regional)
- Crowdsourcing of issues, dialogue forums

FOLLOW-UP:

- Accessible and transparent up-dates on status of policy implementation through online platforms
- Online platforms for feedback and dialogue when issues are raised
- Online exchanges with concerned communities on impact

DRAFTING / NEGOTIATING:

- Access to constantly up-dated information (e.g. shifting agendas and different versions of draft decisions), including information on and links to informal negotiations
- Online expert discussions and/or specific background research when appropriate
- Live-streaming of relevant public meetings
- Availability of online contact information of relevant stakeholders to initiate conversations
- Allocation of space(s) and time for different actors to comment
- Publish options papers and consult on that basis

DECISION STAGE:

- Online participation channels (e.g. video-conferencing, video statements, live-streaming on different platforms)
- Transparent rules and procedures
- Constantly up-dated access to information (e.g. different versions of draft decisions)
- Public (preparation) meetings, inputs through online committee meetings
- Allowing space for debates and inputs from those most affected on channels they are comfortable with
- Consensus-building methodologies