TOGETHER FIRST
A global system that works for all

ID:	Is anonymous?	Is organisation?
344	Yes	Yes

Is form complete:	Organisation name:
Yes	Together First

Global catastrophic risks mitigated	Risk multipliers managed	Implementation timeframe
Climate change	**Conflict or political violence**	**Short**
Eco-system collapse	**Institutions that lack inclusivity or accountability**	
Pandemics and anti-microbial resistance	**Poverty and inequality**	
The threat from new and emerging technology		
Unknown risks		
Weapons of Mass Destruction		

A high-level champion for Civil Society

The United Nations needs a high-level focal point to empower, convene and coordinate civil society. It would powerfully contribute to strengthening citizen engagement and empowering citizens and civil society to help deliver the world we want and the UN we need.

DETAILS

Despite its increasing reliance on civil society organisations (CSOs) across the UN's broad spectrum of work – from service provision to contributing to major policy initiatives like the SDGs – current arrangements for civil society participation across the UN system are piecemeal. Furthermore, civil society representation in UN decision making forums is incredibly uneven and therefore tends to be dominated by the "usual suspects" - well connected western and international NGOs with a significant New York office. Other important elements of civil society - indigenous peoples, farmers, parliamentarians, trade unions - are scarcely represented at all. Furthermore, grassroots organisations among others whose politics cause member states to deny them accreditation have no representation at all.

Meanwhile the relationship between the private sector and the United Nations is unsatisfactory for all: the sector itself faces major hurdles to realising its full potential, the Organisation worries about political and reputational consequences, and civil society organisations raise concerns about the absence of accountability, transparency or oversight.

A senior focal point within the Organisation would level the playing field: providing accountability and transparency with respect to all partnerships, and making sure the usual civil society voices do not dominate. Furthermore, it would provide coherence and structure to the UN's engagement with civil society, thus unleashing the true potential of the peoples, and not just the member states, of the world, therefore enabling the kind of working in partnership that will be required to achieve the SDGs.

WIDER IMPLICATIONS

Enhancing inclusivity and accountability in national and global governance

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THEORY OF CHANGE

Political will exists to realise this proposal

In 2004 a Panel of Eminent Persons on the United Nations-Civil Society Relations headed by Fernando Henrique Cardoso recommended that the UN establish “an Under-Secretary-General in charge of a new Office of Constituency Engagement and Partnerships” – in other words a senior member of staff to act as a focal point for civil society at the UN. This proposal built upon similar calls in Erskine Childers and Brian Urquhart’s 1994 study “Renewing the United Nations System” and has formed the basis of subsequent calls from CIVICUS, UNA-UK and others.

The precedent of Kofi Annan’s Assistant Secretary-General for External Relations – a position that existed until 2003 – could also prove useful. The proposal would seek to recreate the strong elements of this office, while making the brief more encompassing of the whole of civil society.

The office of the focal point need not be large. The ASG for External Relations, widely regarded as a highly effective office, had around six full time staffers. In terms of rank an Assistant Secretary-General or Under-Secretary-General would give the post suitable seniority. However, what is vital is that the office be located within the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, that the Secretary-General champion it, and that the office has access to many other departments including the press office and press spokesperson.

There is far more political will to make this happen than there has been at any time since 2003. Our mapping has revealed a broad but perhaps not well-unified group of states supportive of increased civil society inclusion in UN affairs, a call which was echoed . The proposal was raised time and again in various consultative forums, including at the 2019 UNA-UK - Chatham House joint conference on Kofi Annan's legacy and the 2020 Pyeongchang Peace

Conference. The Secretary-General's 2020 Call to Action on human rights pledged "creating avenues for civil society participation".

There is an urgent need to mobilise non-traditional voices in support of this proposal, in particular by reaching out to UN groups like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the G77, and making the case to them that –far from being a threat –this is a means for broadening the range of stakeholders the UN consults with beyond the WEOG affiliated usual suspects, and therefore a way of getting less visible issues –particularly the development agenda as seen from the perspective of developing countries –raised in priority in New York.

Decision makers and implementers

There is growing frustration within civil society of the shortcomings of the current set-up, and coalescence around the UN75th anniversary process as an opportunity to make progress on this proposal. As well as member states uniting around this idea, we would like to see the Secretary-General champion this idea. This would send a powerful signal of support to civil society, as he looks to cement his legacy and add a concrete deliverable to the ongoing processes to be established in the wake of the 75th anniversary and the world's recovery from COVID-19.

MITIGATING RISKS

Mitigating unknown risks

Erskine Childers once pointed out that the United Nations Charter starts with the words "we the peoples" but then the peoples are scarcely heard from again. The population at large feels alienated from the work of our international institutions, and this sentiment has been exacerbated by the recent upsurge in populist nationalism. Not only does this place the entire system at risk of collapse by calling its legitimacy into question, but it seriously limits our international institutions' efficacy. The UN Secretary-General identified this as one of the four major challenges facing the world in a speech at the start of 2020.

Meaningful change is no longer delivered by states or institutions alone, but in complex partnerships involving large numbers of individuals and organisations from overlapping political, commercial and voluntary institutions. This idea that partnerships are vital for shaping the world we want by 2030 is expressed in Sustainable Development Goal 17.

Stronger engagement is needed with citizens: the public, civil society, the private sector, local and regional government are essential for not only making the system we have work, but also to building a better system

This proposal would mark a step towards improved relations between our global system and the people it was set up to serve.