

Enhancing civil society participation in international climate decision-making

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH



TOGETHER FIRST
A GLOBAL SYSTEM THAT WORKS FOR ALL

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About Together First

Together First was founded in 2018 to promote tangible steps towards the global governance transformation we need to mitigate the catastrophic risks that threaten humanity. We are campaigners and experts; former diplomats and policymakers; youth leaders and innovators committed to making change – in the short, medium and long-term – to create a global system that is effective, equitable, open, inclusive and capable of ongoing renewal.

In 2020, Together First held broad-based global consultations to identify workable options to address global risks which resulted in our to-do list, featured in the UN Secretary-General's September 2020 interim update "UN75: The Future We Want, The UN We Need". Together First's framing as well as key proposals were subsequently reflected in the Secretary-General's report: "Our Common Agenda", released in September 2021.

Together First is now supporting dedicated action on the reform goals contained in the to-do list with a focus on inclusive multilateralism and civil society participation in decision-making structures. The United Nations Association – UK provides the secretariat for Together First. We are grateful to the Global Challenges Foundation for its financial and practical support, and to our partners, advisers and focus group members for their guidance.

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About this report

The Together First campaign is committed to advancing the best ideas for improving global governance. Throughout 2020, we ran extensive consultations, including thematic and regional dialogues with policy-makers and shapers, through an online portal to which individuals and organizations could submit ideas for global governance reform.

This resulted in our [Stepping stones](#) report that features 10 tangible proposals for more effective global governance which should be a cornerstone of the international community's commitment to build back better. All proposals are anchored in the imperative to strengthen civil society participation and citizen engagement in the UN's work.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a critical role in advancing UN objectives and programmes – from providing basic services to advocating for the marginalised, from generating funds to providing life-saving assistance. Yet their ability to participate in deliberative and decision-making forums is limited: often piecemeal, ad hoc or tokenistic, and confined to a privileged few, notably well-connected Western organisations with a presence in New York or Geneva. While the Covid-19 pandemic has seen some welcome progress in expanding opportunities for virtual participation, it has further reinforced the gulf between digital haves and have-nots – especially when physical access remains restricted.

The UN's work to combat the climate emergency is no exception. What is exceptional is the acute need to widen participation on this issue given the magnitude and breadth of the task at hand. It is also clear that while this is a truly universal crisis, it is the poorest among us who are bearing the brunt. To respond effectively, the UN will need to move from mobilising billions of dollars to trillions over the next decade.¹ Close cooperation with CSOs will be essential to ensure that these funds are directed in an open, accountable and needs-based manner.

To examine the status of civil society engagement in the UN's climate change work, Together First partnered with Brazilian-based Plataforma CIPÓ, one of its organisational members. CIPÓ is an independent, women-led policy institute focusing on climate, governance, and peacebuilding in the Global South and how global solutions can be leveraged to address these issues.

The report acknowledges the positive contribution

of CSOs to climate advocacy and action, formally through UN channels and informally through external campaigning and powerful transnational movements. However, it notes the huge untapped potential for deeper UN-civil society collaboration which must be addressed if the international community is to address the twin crises of climate breakdown and biodiversity loss.

In this report Adriana Erthal Abdenur and Nayifa Nihad draw on analysis of official documents and interviews with key stakeholders, especially climate activists from Global South organizations, to identify barriers to effective participation in UN climate processes and make proposals for improving the institutional setup. Documented barriers include: financial, bureaucratic, informational, language, accessibility and IT barriers, as well as constraints in relation to visa issues and Covid-19 – all of which inhibit the ability of civil society to gain accreditation and participate fully in discussions. The report also notes the gatekeeper and facilitation roles played by member states, which in some circumstances give countries the ability to veto the participation of CSOs, reflecting the increasingly troubling global picture of closing civic space and reprisals against outspoken environmental activists.

Key recommendations at the global level include:

- Increased participation and access rights at major conferences, as well as channels for ongoing interaction between the parties to agreements and civil society
- The appointment of a UN civil society champion to lead a process to open up the UN system to civil society, remove barriers to participation and advocate against the politicisation of CSO access
- A dedicated fund should be established to help guarantee broad representation of civil society at COPs and other relevant climate negotiations spaces, and widely disseminated to reach CSOs in the field
- An explicit role for CSOs in monitoring implementation of commitments
- More accessible and simpler accreditation procedures, widely available translation beyond the official UN languages, and inclusive technologies to overcome technical and bureaucratic difficulties including at COPs

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/mark-carney-investing-net-zero-climate-solutions-creates-value-and-rewards>

Introduction

Making global governance more inclusive, transparent and fair has emerged as one of the primary calls by civil society, both during and in the aftermath of the UN 75th anniversary commemoration. As the impacts of climate change are felt more acutely around the world and as the topic moves centre stage in the international agenda, the need to ensure that the principles of inclusiveness, transparency and fairness are met in key negotiating and implementation spaces has become more urgent. As the main decision-making body of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), where the parties meet to assess progress in dealing with climate change, the Conference of the Parties (COP) is of both symbolic and strategic importance for civil society participation.

The inclusion of sub-state and non-state actors in international climate processes, including the COP itself, has varied widely.² The UNFCCC, adopted in 1992, yielded innovations in the participation and the utilization of inputs from civil society – propelled, in part, by the Agenda 21 emerging out of the Earth Summit and promoting the localization of sustainable development. Yet, at first, civil society constituencies were very narrowly defined, and opportunities for providing input and voicing concerns remained exceptions. As a consequence, in the 2000s meaningful participation remained limited. It was only after COP 15, held in Copenhagen in 2009, failed to reach binding commitments by states, that space opened up in international climate negotiations for a broader array of non-governmental actors (local and regional authorities, private sector, NGOs, activist groups, a wider array of scientists, etc.).³ In addition, greater unity developed among civil society entities as they sought ways to influence those decision-making spaces.

As a result, by the time of the Paris Agreement negotiations, which concluded in 2015, civil society

had become more sophisticated and more effective in exerting influence through different channels. This was reflected in the growing ways in which COP secretariats sought to include civil society – for instance, through direct accreditation with observer status and through partnerships at the country level – as well as in the strategies developed independently by non-state actors to help ensure not only their presence, but also their meaningful participation, for instance through the formation of horizontal networks for information-sharing.⁴

However, this participation cannot be taken for granted: not only does it vary widely across decision-making spaces, across countries and over time, it is also subject to reversals, for instance when authoritarian governments deny or restrict NGO participation in COP delegations. Given today's challenging geopolitical conditions, the evolving nature of the international climate regime since Paris, and the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, civil society must now once again recalibrate its strategies to ensure continued and increasing relevance, particularly in the run up to the COP26 in Glasgow. This is particularly urgent due to concerns about the impact of virtual or hybrid conference formats.⁵

This policy note draws on a combination of analysis of official documents and interviews with key stakeholders, especially climate activists from Global South organizations, to analyze the main challenges and potential solutions to ensuring reliable, meaningful participation of civil society in international climate regime spaces, including COP meetings. More specifically, we interviewed four climate specialists with direct involvement in climate negotiations at the country and international levels. These interviews were complemented with desk research aimed at identifying key channels for participation, as well as the main hurdles for deepening and broadening the role of civil society in international climate spaces.

² [Brendan Guy \(2018\) "Background Paper The Role of Sub-state and Non-state Actors in International Climate Processes: Civil Society." Chatham House.](#)

³ Chandra Lal Pandey (2015) "Managing Climate Change: Shifting Roles for NGOs in the Climate Negotiations." *Environmental Values*, 24(6), pp.799–824.

⁴ Adriana Erthal Abdenur (2021) "Climate Action: Beyond the Paris Agreement" in T. Weiss and R. Wilkinson (Eds.), *Global Governance Futures*. New York: Routledge.

⁵ [Friends of the Earth Scotland. \(n.d.\). UN Climate Summit, Glasgow 2021.](#)



Icebergs in Ilulissat Icefjord, Greenland where the melting of ice sheets is accelerating. © UNEP/Flickr



#SustainaClaus and the Sustainas celebrate #ChangeWednesday at COP25.
© UNClimateChange/Philip McMaster

How civil society entered international climate spaces

When major global governance institutions, including the UN system, began to address climate change, they did so in a very state-centric way. From the start, climate change was approached as a global issue rather than presented as a national-level problem, albeit one that states had to tackle. Climate governance thus sought to address this on the international stage, especially through Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs). Yet participatory mechanisms began emerging that also included non-state actors. Starting in 1983, the Brundtland Commission, which aimed to unite countries in pursuit of sustainable development, created networks to bring together governments and non-government entities, as well as private sector actors. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPPC), established in 1988, brought in scientists and experts for input, analysis and projections. For the first two decades of its existence the panel was primarily focused on persuading states to make binding commitments to curbing greenhouse gases. Although it made some inroads into influencing public opinion in its early days, it began its work to engage the broader public later on.⁶

The 1992 Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro, echoed the optimism around the capacity of states

in addressing challenges related to sustainable development. But the conference also reflected the limitations of this top-down approach. The Earth Summit yielded three conventions: the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNDDC) – all of them linked to scientific advisory boards and expert groups. The 1997 Kyoto Protocol featured an innovation for participation, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), which supports businesses, governments and other organizations, among others, to engage with climate issues. This represented an important early step in the incorporation of non-government actors into global climate governance.

As environmental movements expanded transnationally and began dovetailing with climate activism, calls increased to open up space for civil society participation in formal negotiation processes related to climate. However, it was only after the 2009 Copenhagen Accord that civil society benefited from more participatory channels. To some extent the failure of negotiators to agree upon binding emissions targets opened up space for a greater variety of responses and discourses around climate

changes, including bottom-up approaches. It also led to a broader gamut of actors becoming engaged in climate governance efforts – regional organizations, private sector companies, and civil society entities.⁷

For the most part, civil society engagement in global climate governance has taken place parallel to, rather than intersecting with, key negotiations and other decision-making processes. However, some important channels for participation have emerged. In particular, the UNFCCC allows NGOs and media to take part as observers. As of 2018, more than 2200 NGOs (an additional 22 NGOs by 2019)⁸ and 130 Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs) representing a broad spectrum of interests (environmental groups, farming and agriculture, indigenous populations, research and academic institutions, women and gender and youth groups, and labour unions, among others) had been admitted as observers⁹. The Conference of Youth (COY)¹⁰ has taken place since 2012 and brings together youth activists from around the world three days before the COP. It also serves as a preparatory session and capacity-building effort for/by youth NGOs to develop position

papers, network and meet new members, and hold strategy sessions in order to prepare for their participation at COP.

By the time COP26 was initially announced, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, civil society was participating in climate negotiations, processes and meetings through a variety of channels. Several COPs featured participation mechanisms before, during and after COP meetings. Pre-COP efforts included consultations held by COP's secretariat with civil society during the planning process, which is used to gather opinions and recommendations in the lead-up to the Conference.¹¹ In addition, at the country level, some states held meetings with civil society prior to informal negotiation meetings in order to present their work, national positions and the state of progress of negotiations.

There are also groups such as the Climate Action Network (CAN), a global network of over 1,500 CSOs in more than 130 countries, who play a key role in supporting other NGOs that might not have the access and influence of lobbying by themselves or attending COPs.

⁷ Fariborz Zelli (2011) "The fragmentation of the global climate governance architecture" *WIREs Climate Change* 2(2), pp. 255-270

⁸ David Krantz (2021) "COP and the Cloth: Quantitatively and Normatively Assessing Religious NGO Participation at the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change". *Sci*, 3(2).

⁹ UNFCCC (2020) "Overview".

¹⁰ UNFCCC (2021). "Conference on Youth (COY)".

¹¹ Open Government Partnership. (n.d.) "Civil Society & Transparency in COP21 Conference Planning."

⁶ IPCC (n.d.) "Factsheet: Timeline - Highlights of IPCC history."

On paper, if not in practice

On paper, civil society organizations with UNFCCC observer status can attend COP meetings. Depending on the nature of relations with the national government, they are able to work closely with the government representatives in state delegations to provide inputs and advice. General statements from civil society are allowed at the beginning of meetings, although not during discussions.¹² Some countries make available detailed information on how civil society can take part in the UNFCCC, as well as records on who participated, but this is not a uniform practice.¹³ COP organisers also issue guidebooks and other publications with information for civil society engagement at the conference, which include opportunities to develop position papers and submissions in response to call for information by negotiating bodies, holding bilaterals with government delegates, organizing side events and exhibits,

as well as making joint constituency statements in the plenaries.¹⁴

In addition, there are dedicated spaces within the COP grounds for civil society. For instance, the Civil Society Hub acts as an informal space for representatives and activists to meet, network, and socialize.¹⁵ Activists note that these informal spaces have provided valuable opportunities for civil society coordination and engagement.

According to Fernanda Carvalho, a leading climate activist from Brazil, these informal spaces – such as casual conversations in the corridors over coffee or tea – serve as an important way of meeting other like-minded groups, negotiators, and press, expanding networks and exchanging information. When asked about the possible challenges of transitioning to more virtual settings due to the global Covid-19 pandemic, one activist says:

“Having in-person conferences allows us to participate more directly. We are able to make statements, take notes, and hold people accountable; this is much harder in a hybrid format. Even in-between sessions, we are able to informally discuss issues with stakeholders and negotiators, over coffee and in the corridors, and these networking opportunities result in being extremely fruitful.”



Youth For Power event at the 4th United Nations Environment Assembly in Nairobi. © NATALIA MROZ/ UNEP

¹² Transparency International (2011) “Guaranteeing Public Participation in Climate Governance” Policy Position 01/2011.

¹³ There are also separate channels for civil society participation in climate financing, for which there are many forms and channels, and these vary widely.

¹⁴ UNFCCC. (n.d.). “COP24.”

¹⁵ Stop Climate Chaos. (2008).

The impact of participation

The importance of civil society participation in climate processes cannot be underestimated. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), universities, think tanks and others can provide technical expertise, issue publications, and press for evidence-based and locally-informed decision-making.¹⁶ They can enhance accountability and transparency, carry out independent monitoring, ensure effective implementation, and facilitate or lead information exchange.

Another major contribution of civil society is to convey the urgency of the issues and prevent discussions from descending into the abstract. To quote Carvalho: “[CSOs] bring reality to the room,” conferring credibility and sometimes first-hand experiences of climate change:

“When you are in a room discussing something important [...] it is amazing to see how that can be detached from reality. For example, when we get people from the islands, like Fiji, to talk about the impacts that adds to the legitimacy of the process.”

Others have noted that, without civil society participation, major landmarks would not have been achieved. Without consultations with civil society, for instance, there would be no Agenda 2030, including SDG 13 on Climate Action.¹⁷ In climate negotiations, the absence of civil society may lead to more “loopholes” in key documents and commitments.¹⁸

However, they face several hurdles in meaningful participation – both longstanding and in the wake of Covid-19. The next section outlines some of the main challenges identified by interviewees.



Youth gather in Karura forest, Nairobi, in solidarity with the global climate youth marches. c. UNEP/Flickr

¹⁶ Fundación Avina (2019) “Como a sociedade civil pode contribuir para a ação climática no contexto da COP25?” October.

¹⁷ Thure Krarup (2020) “Why the voice of civil society matters more than ever in the era of Covid-19” UN Foundation, July 16.

See also Bond (2019). “Ensuring civil society is heard: Principles and practices to improve government engagement with civil society”.

¹⁸ Lars H. Gulbrandsen and Steinar Andresen (2004) “NGO influence in the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol: Compliance, Flexibility Mechanisms, and Sinks” Global Environmental Politics 4:4, pp. 54-75.

Longstanding hurdles

Many NGOs face financial, bureaucratic and informational barriers for accreditation and obtaining badges. Limitations in resources (for instance, funding to physically attend major conferences) continue to curtail participation, as does insufficient technical knowledge needed to accompany negotiations and major debates. Participants with disabilities also face specific challenges to participation, including due to the fact that there is no official Constituency (a group recognized by the UNFCCC as having a special stake in the conference) for Disabled People/ People with Disabilities.¹⁹ Other barriers stem from climate politics, for instance in countries where climate denialist leaderships keep civil society at arm's length or criminalize it, officially preventing them from forming part of their delegations. Such obstacles are especially pertinent in authoritarian states (elected and unelected) whose governments have repressed or closed civic space.²⁰

Accreditation issues also remain a pervasive barrier to participation. Each space within the UN has different access opportunities with its own set of rules controlling whether NGOs can observe meetings, deliver statements or organise events. Given the broad, cross-cutting nature of climate change and the corresponding presence of the issue on the agendas of a wide range of UN entities, the vagaries of UN accreditation processes can cause a significant barrier to participation. Normally, to gain access an NGO will have to either obtain short term accreditation for a particular conference or establish a more permanent relationship with the UN through the gold standard "ECOSOC consultative status". Consultative status gives NGOs long-term access to a host of core and subsidiary UN bodies, including special events organised by the General Assembly, but the process to acquire the status is highly politicized making it almost impossible for some NGOs.²¹

The UNFCCC – the UN's primary body tasked with responding to climate change – has its own accreditation process whereby NGOs must be first be admitted by the Conference of the Parties (COP) as observer organizations to the UNFCCC process before they can send representatives to attend any sessions or meetings of the UNFCCC. Western NGOs appear better equipped to navigate this process: as of 2017, over two-thirds of UNFCCC observer organizations were from the Western European and Others group.²² Beyond observer status, the UNFCCC has enabled a limited number of NGOs to participate at COP26 through 'provisional admittance' status.²³

Maria Reyes, a Mexican climate activist, was recently quoted in The Guardian stating that: "...as the Mexican government was operating a functioning programme, she should be vaccinated through them. But Reyes, 19, has been told by local administrators she has to wait her turn."²⁴

Technical difficulties, especially the language barrier, pose considerable challenges. CSO representatives who do not speak English as their primary language find it difficult to navigate the complex processes and heavy jargon of international climate conventions. For indigenous people and traditional communities, in particular, this limits their chances of fully participating in negotiations and connecting with other global networks, as they have to depend on translators and/or other interlocutors.

The technical language used in these conferences is complicated even for representatives who are well-versed in this field. Language accessibility is especially crucial when navigating logistical information and changes to scheduling, location or rules/guidelines for participation. These technical difficulties and language barriers (both of which may be exacerbated by the shift towards a hybrid format) pose further difficulties for Global South organizations.

Just on the issue of language alone, Cinthya Feitosa, a climate specialist at the Institute of Climate and Society, mentions:

"Portuguese, for example, is not an official language. The technical language on its own is a challenge, but many of us even have to rely on translators to guide us through official processes. [CSOs] often do not understand what the agreements are and have to rely on workshops [to familiarise themselves with the] technical language and the correlations between policies."

Within the context of the pandemic, vaccine inequality and travel barriers placed on citizens from many countries is also likely to decrease participation, even as technology broadens it in some contexts. With the surge in Delta infections, some activists have been calling for COP26 to be postponed altogether, arguing that representatives from the most climate-vulnerable countries will be locked out due to travel restrictions or vaccination status.²⁵ Over 90% of people in Africa, for instance, are yet to receive their first dose. While the UK has offered vaccinations to attendees, the risks and hurdles may still be too challenging for many CSOs.

Finally, interviewees noted a problem of continuity: namely, scant opportunities for preparation and follow-up to COPs. While there are both informal and formal spaces for civil society participation, most of these spaces are highly exclusive,

accessible only to a number of well-connected and well-funded NGOs. Other civil society actors – especially those from highly climate-vulnerable communities and/or who also are part of solutions on the ground, such as indigenous groups – remain excluded, in part due to lack of resources, language barriers, and excessively demanding bureaucratic requirements.



¹⁹ Sustained Ability (2021) "Disability led climate action".

²⁰ CIVICUS (2021) "2021 State of Civil Society Report". See also International Disability Alliance (2021) "Disability inclusive climate action."

²¹ Melissa Kent (2018) "Politicized UN committee using 'repeated and arbitrary referrals' to block NGOs, critics say" CBC News, 21 January.

²² UNFCCC (n.d.) "Statistics on non-Party stakeholders."

²³ UNFCCC (2021) "How to obtain observer status."

²⁴ Lizzy Davies (2021) "COP26 will be 'rich nations stitch-up' if poorer countries are kept away by Covid" The Guardian, 7 September.

²⁵ Climate Action Network (2021) "Climate Action Network calls for postponement of formal climate COP26 negotiations due to lack of plans to ensure safe and inclusive participation" 7 September.



Human chain COP25 DAY 9. © UNFCCC/Flickr

Rollbacks and new challenges

There are also instances of rollbacks in CSO participation in COPs. Although some states, including Canada,²⁶ Guatemala²⁷ and Malawi,²⁸ allow CSOs as part of their delegations, this varies greatly, from meaningful participation to tokenism. Some states may deny or constrain this participation, for instance when they feel that official positions are being threatened or contested by civil society.²⁹ In 2019, for instance, the Brazilian government, under a far-right president, refused to provide credentials to civil society for COP25, the first time this happened since Brazilian CSOs began participating in climate negotiations at the 1992 Earth Summit.³⁰

In fact, taking part in COPs can even pose risks to some organizations. At COP24, held in Katowice, Polish authorities restricted climate protests and used the occasion to expand police surveillance.³¹ In 2020, it emerged that the Brazilian government had sent agents from the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (ABIN) to monitor Brazilian CSOs attending the COP so as to prevent them from raising their concerns regarding the government's environmental and climate policies.³² Given the

increase in violent attacks against environmental and climate defenders in places like Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, India, Kenya, and South Africa,³³ these restrictions and surveillance may pose additional threats to activists working on environmental and climate issues.

As a result of such restrictions, civil society organizations are frequently denied access to policy-making processes at the conferences. Moreover, their observer status limits their participation to pre-submitted submissions to make an oral statement, leaving them unable to voice their positions during crucial moments of negotiations.

Informal spaces are gaining tremendous momentum, especially nowadays with the growth of movements around topics such as nature-based solutions and the bioeconomy. Through informal channels, civil society organizations are able to use the space to introduce new topics into the agenda and gain support through lobbying channels. However, such informal lobbying channels could also go in the opposite direction as we saw in the

COP25 summit where concerns were raised about the role of fossil fuel representatives at various participatory stages.³⁴

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought even more challenges for civil society to participate in international avenues, including in the climate field. In response to the overlapping challenges of the pandemic – including vaccine inequity, reduced budgets and travel restrictions – many organizations, including UN bodies, have transitioned to virtual or hybrid formats for meetings and events. On the positive side, this transition provides the opportunity for a greater array of civil society organizations to participate.

From a climate perspective, it also reduces the carbon footprint of major conferences, including the COPs. Even in the current context, an estimated 25,000 representatives, including government officials, media, and campaigners, will be in Glasgow in person for COP26. On the other hand, virtual or hybrid formats pose new hurdles to participation, among them technological barriers with roughly 40% of the world not having access to the internet.³⁵ In addition, key negotiations and formal spaces can remain off-limits to civil society.³⁶

A Global South climate specialist highlights this risk:

“This year especially, the logistical information is difficult with Covid. It is a combination of the postponement and the need to pay more attention to the logistics with the uncertainties of getting necessary documents such as the observer statuses. This is extremely difficult for developing countries because we have to organize airplanes, secure funding, and follow these processes without the guarantees.”

²⁶ BCCIC (2021) “Toward more meaningful civil society engagement”.

²⁷ UNFCCC (2019) “Provisional list of registered participants”.

²⁸ Heinrich Böll Stiftung (2014) “20 years of African CSO involvement in Climate Change Negotiations: Priorities, Strategies and Actions”.

²⁹ Böhmelt, T. (2012). A closer look at the information provision rationale: Civil society participation in states' delegations at the UNFCCC. The Review of International Organizations, 8(1), pp.55–80.

³⁰ Rodrigo Castro (2019) “Pela primeira vez, governo brasileiro não credencia sociedade civil para Conferência do Clima” O Globo, 7 December.

³¹ Cara Schulte (2021) “Climate Defenders Threatened, Struggle to Make Their Voices Heard” Human Rights Watch.

³² Climate Home News (2020) “Brazilian spies intimidated government's own delegates at climate talks.”

³³ See, for instance, Human Rights Watch (2021) “Human Rights Watch submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association on the challenges and threats facing climate defenders.”

³⁴ Galey, P. (2019). Fossil fuel groups “destroying” climate talks: NGOs. [online] Phys.org.

³⁵ COP26: Covid travel rules relaxed for overseas delegates. (2021). BBC News. [online]

³⁶ DataReportal – Global Digital Insights. (n.d.). 60% of the World's Population Is Now Online. [online]

One of the most pertinent issues is transparency. Meetings on reporting – of performance, finance and negotiations – are out of bounds to observers at the request of certain countries. For example, during some virtual meetings, China opposed the participation of civil society on the grounds that they could potentially record the meeting. While civil society fights to be included as observers, what observers are able to do is becoming a battleground.

Virtual conference settings have also prolonged specific segments of the conference. Due to the length of the statements by member states, civil society organizations with observer status (NGOs) were unable to present their oral statements before the time exceeded. And direct interaction with negotiators across halls or during breaks – usually an effective networking method with civil society groups and other observers – is either non-existent or limited.

“I think the decision in 1992 of having a separate Convention on climate and a separate Convention on Biological Diversity [the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Convention and the Convention on Biological Diversity] was a big mistake. Different UN bureaucracies and processes were formed around each of them and they often do not dialogue with each other. This also affects implementation aspects. Because you have different reporting requirements for member states, you often have different ministers in charge of advancing different aspects of these two agendas, which slows down progress at the national level. But recently there is a movement by NGOs and scientists to show that you cannot tackle both crises if they are not tackled together. I think a matching point between the two agendas could be the discussion on nature-based solutions or how to address ecosystems in the climate regime. It is important to build these synergies around these two agendas.”

Fragmentation of equally important conversations results in the inability to tackle multiple crises simultaneously, and it exacerbates the previously mentioned problems of resource scarcity and technical and language barriers.

Lastly, the siloed nature of climate and other issues can make it challenging for CSOs to engage. For example, even though climate, environment and biodiversity are strongly interrelated, they are separated in global governance arrangements – with different treaties, each with their own tracks, schedules, coordinating bodies and rules on participation.

This division has resulted in a lack of understanding, as well as insufficient collaboration across these issues and their respective research and policy communities. On forests, for instance, fragmentation of policies and education results in focusing more on carbon measures and not so much on the relation of forests and biodiversity with the oceans and communities surrounding them.

When asked about the fragmentation of policies, a climate expert mentions:



A view of electrical transmission towers in a mountainous area of Sapa, Viet Nam. 1.6 billion people the world over, or a quarter of humanity, live without electricity. © UN Photo/Kibae Park

Recommendations for enhancing civil society participation in international climate decision-making

The Glasgow COP will be a test for overcoming not only emerging challenges specific to the pandemic, but also long-standing hurdles to the inclusive, meaningful, and reliable participation by civil society in international climate processes. Yet the effort to enhance CSO participation reaches beyond the upcoming COP to encompass future conferences and other negotiation spaces. Based on the challenges and hurdles identified in this paper, the following recommendations aim to instigate changes at the national and international level.

AT THE UNITED NATIONS

More institutionalized channels should be created for civil society organizations to connect with the agreement parties and processes, rather than just with other civil society organizations. This includes clear focal points in each climate space (including related environmental conventions) tasked with engaging civil society, as well as mechanisms to ensure that their participation during talks is meaningful and goes beyond the delivery of pre-prepared statements.

This item is aligned with point 10 (Boost partnerships) of the UN Secretary-General’s Our Common Agenda report, which refers to the establishment of “civil society focal points in all United Nations entities”.³⁷ As an extension of this, the Secretary-General should heed the call from Together First and others for a Champion for Civil Society at the UN to coordinate more democratic and streamlined access for CSOs.³⁸

More inclusive documents, in terms of their technicality and language, are needed for broader comprehension and participation by civil society. This is especially relevant for indigenous communities, disability groups and, more broadly, Global South organizations. In addition, a dedicated fund should be established to help guarantee broad representation of civil society at COPs and other relevant climate negotiations spaces, and widely disseminated to reach CSOs in the field.

AMONG CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

More horizontal networking on everything from accreditation to navigating information is necessary. This should include an effort to make the networks more inclusive, not only with respect to scientists other than climatologists (for instance, through the inclusion of more social scientists), but also with respect to indigenous, women, youth, and other groups especially those represented by smaller NGOs rather than just the big, resource-rich “usual suspects.” The “Major Groups and Other Stakeholders” (MGoS) model³⁹ adopted for the Sustainable Development Goals might serve as a source of inspiration for enhancing the impact of CSOs in the processes of implementation, monitoring, and review of climate-related commitments.

AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

Relations and trust between civil society and government could be achieved through measures such as creating more continuous and institutionalized spaces for civil society and ensuring better circulation of information in relation to participation in negotiations and implementation mechanisms. Government teams should also hold regular meetings and “check in” with civil society.

OVERVIEW

- Channels should be created for civil society organizations to connect with the agreement parties and processes with clear focal points in each climate space
- Appointment of UN Champion for Civil Society
- More horizontal networking among CSOs
- More inclusive documents and a dedicated fund to help guarantee broad representation
- An explicit role for CSOs in monitoring implementation of commitments
- Creating more continuous and institutionalized spaces for civil society at national level

³⁷ UN (2021) “Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General”.

³⁸ TF 2021, “Together First launches new report: The case for a UN civil society champion”

³⁹ WECF (2021) “Reflections on the Major Groups and other Stakeholders system”.

COVER IMAGE: Climate strike youth. Youth gather in Karura forest, Nairobi, in solidarity with the global climate youth marches. March 15, 2019. © UNEP/Flickr

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