

The case for a UN civil society champion

A NEW REPORT FROM TOGETHER FIRST

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Ben Donaldson of Together First addresses a high profile UN75 Dialogue. © PyeongChang Peace Forum 2020

About Together First

Together First is a rapidly growing network of global citizens, civil society organisations, practitioners, parliamentarians, business leaders and activists from all regions of the world committed to fair, open and inclusive solutions to improve global governance.

We are driven by the urgent need to address global catastrophic risks and to expand the boundaries of political possibility.

Throughout 2020 Together First is leading a global campaign to:



Identify workable ways to address global risks through broad-based global consultations



Produce a “to-do” list for the international community by prioritising the leading ideas



Mobilise our diverse network to make these solutions a reality

We are most grateful for the support of the Global Challenges Foundation.

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About this report

The Together First campaign is committed to advancing the best ideas for improving global governance. To this end, we ran an extensive consultation to which individuals and organizations could submit their ideas for global governance reform. The outputs are presented in the Together First [campaign hub](#) – a searchable database of ideas that users can endorse, support, and campaign to turn into a reality.

Following further conversations with current and former policy-makers and shapers, Together First chose 10 ideas that were at or near a “tipping point” moment, where a concerted campaign could lead to implementation in the foreseeable future. These 10 ideas were presented in our “stepping stones” report.

In addition, we are commissioning a series of reports looking deeper into specific issues arising from the erosion of multilateralism in our global system. For the second of these expert reports, we have commissioned Fred Carver to further explore the idea of the UN appointing a “civil society champion” – an idea that emerged via the Together First process, appears as the first item in the Stepping Stones report, and has rapidly gained momentum.

Fred Carver is a freelance researcher with 10 years’ experience in senior leadership roles in human rights and international relations policy influencing organisations. Most recently, he served for four years as Head of Policy of the United Nations Association – UK, the secretariat for Together First. In this capacity he ran the Together First consultation process. He continues to consult for UNA-UK and Together First.

In this report the author synthesises three inputs:

- An earlier confidential discussion paper he wrote on the subject of the civil society champion, which in turn draws from a wide array of expert input that took place in the course of the Together First consultation, the submissions to the Together First campaign hub from Civicus and UNA-UK, and the proposal that appears in the Stepping Stones report and was incorporated into the UN75 People’s Declaration adopted in May 2020.
- A [concept note](#) written by Jeffery Huffines, a consultant for Together First and the UN2020 process, on the need to improve engagement between the UN and civil society.
- Outputs of two expert workshops convened by Together First, UN2020, and the Stimson Center as part of the Sept. 16–17 [UN75 Global Governance Forum’s partnership track](#).¹

¹ Participating organizations in both workshops included: Access Now, Amnesty International, Article 19, Civicus, Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch, Igarape Institute, Int’l Women’s Association, ISHR, NGOCS-D-NY, Oxfam, UNA-UK, Universal Rights Group, WFM Canada, DESA OISC, DESA NGO Branch, DGC, EOSG, OHCHR, UN75, UN Women.



A United Nations stand at a conference in Brussels in 2018. Attempts by the UN to reach out to the public and civil society are currently ad-hoc. © UNRIC

He explores the civil society champion concept and questions and suggestions that have been raised in discussions about the idea. He also presents the opinions of experts that he has canvassed, presenting the consensus opinion where it exists, and outlining the debate and presenting his opinion where it does not.

While this report represents the author’s opinion, Together First and a number of organisations and individuals, listed in the footnote above, were consulted on the draft. Several of them and others besides, [listed here](#), offer their broad support for the concept of a civil society champion. In the months to follow we hope many more individuals and organisations will join them. [Visit this page](#) to read the statement of endorsement, see who has signed, and sign up yourself.

The Case for a Civil Society Champion

A civil society champion would be able to make three primary positive contributions to UN-Civil Society interactions:

- It would increase the Organisation’s limited capacity to engage proactively with civil society.
- It would allow for the improvement of processes for civil society engagement, which vary greatly across the UN system, from organisation to organisation, country to country and sometimes even event to event. It could perform an assessment of best practices, inconsistencies and roadblocks, with a view to raising standards and simplifying processes.

- Most importantly, it would allow the UN to hear from a broader, more diverse and representative cross-section of civil society voices by proactively seeking out, through field visits and consultations, their views. At present, larger and better-resourced organisations, particularly those based in New York and Geneva, or in country office locations, have disproportionate access. Virtual participation can help to level the playing field, but only if these opportunities are known about and supported.

A civil society champion is needed because levels of engagement with civil society within the UN system are currently insufficient. Engagement is piecemeal,

ad-hoc, inconsistent, and reactive. While one role on its own is not sufficient to change that, the absence of a senior champion within the organisation for civil society means that it is necessary – as 75 years of campaigning for greater civil society engagement at the UN while making only incremental and contested progress can attest.

Furthermore, the central simple idea of a civil society champion, and the strong coalition that has developed around it, can help carry a wider reform agenda to open up the UN system to civil society. A champion is just one, albeit crucial, element of the civil society strategy the UN needs, but it can act as a synecdoche or talisman for the whole.

A civil society champion will also help the Organisation prepare for the future. In the long term, one of the primary challenges the United

Nations faces is that as a state centric institution in an increasingly multipolar world it may struggle for relevance if it does not adapt. Governments are no longer the only, or even the primary, actors in many areas – from tech companies in the digital sphere and multinationals with revenues exceeding countries’ GDP, to small NGOs with the local knowledge needed to make an impact, to social movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter that can change the global conversation overnight.

The importance of actors beyond the state has been acknowledged in a number of ways over the years, most powerfully in Sustainable Development Goal 17: partnerships for the goals. This importance will only grow as we enter the “decade of action” to deliver the Goals, and as global interconnectedness and horizontal linkages continue to erode the power of the state.



The United Nations office in Cameroon spreads the word about the UN’s 75th anniversary. © UN75

“At present, larger and better-resourced organisations, particularly those based in New York and Geneva, or in country office locations, have disproportionate access.”

A brief history of the proposal for a civil society champion

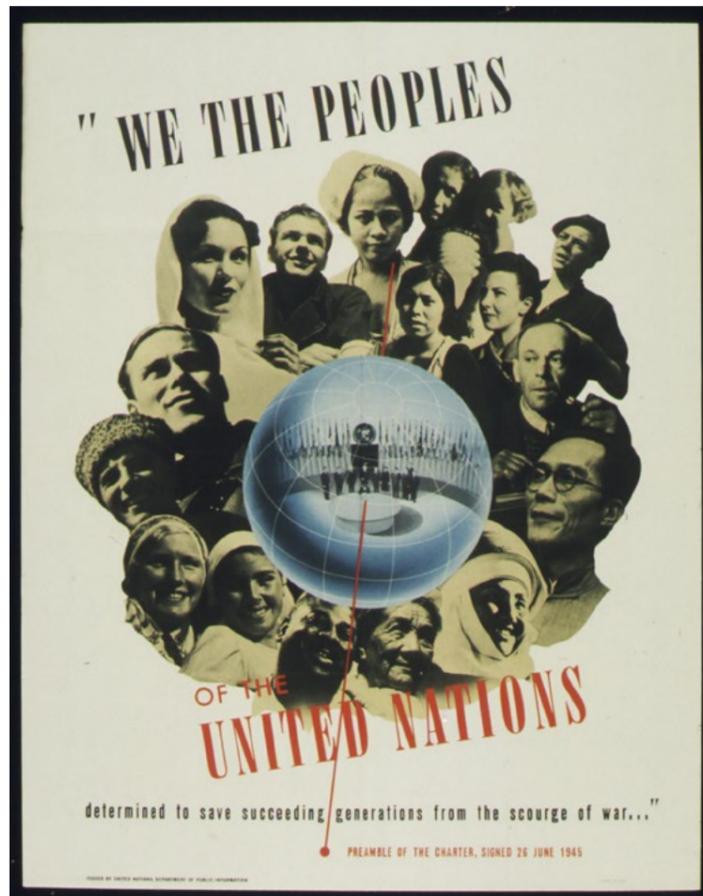
From the moment the UN Charter was finalised, in collaboration with civil society, the relationship between civil society and the UN has been in flux. While other international institutions, notably the International Labour Organisation (ILO), were set up with a formalised role for non-state representatives, the UN was not. Instead, two entirely separate processes evolved.

Article 61 of the UN Charter created the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and, through Article 71, opened the door for NGOs to apply for formal consultative status through the Committee on NGOs – established in 1946 and currently administered by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) NGO Branch. ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31 governs the establishment of consultative status, as well as the accreditation of a broader group of civil society to UN conferences and consultations. There are three types of consultative status: General, Special and Roster. Consultative status provides NGOs with access to not only ECOSOC, but also to its many subsidiary bodies, to the various human rights mechanisms of the United Nations, ad-hoc processes such as those on small arms, and special events organized by the President of the General Assembly. As of April 2020, there are 5,451 NGOs in consultative status with ECOSOC. Many civil society organisations have expressed concern that the process of acquiring consultative status has become overly politicised and subject to inappropriate interference from individual states.

The Department of Global Communications (DGC), previously known as the Department of Public Information (DPI), was also established in 1946 by the General Assembly to promote global awareness and understanding of the work of the UN. In 1968, ECOSOC, by Resolution 1297

(XLIV) of 27 May, called on DPI to associate NGOs, “to support the work of the United Nations and to promote knowledge of its principles and activities, in accordance with its own aims and purposes...”. The Civil Society Unit, formerly known as NGO Relations, is within the Outreach Division in the DGC with over 1,500 CSOs currently in formal association in support of the department’s efforts to disseminate information on the work and role of the UN. These two forms of accreditation are commonly known as ECOSOC accreditation and DGC accreditation respectively.

A third element of the United Nations also helps to support civil society. The UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service (UN-NGLS or NGLS) began in 1975 as an inter-agency programme of the UN, administered by United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) since 1988, with offices in Geneva and New York, mandated to promote and develop constructive relations



A World War Two era propaganda poster for the United Nations. © U.S. National Archives and Records Administration

between the UN and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). In 2019, UN-NGLS moved to the Civil Society Unit within the DGC where it currently helps facilitate the coordination of Civil Society Entities (not in ECOSOC-status) in events organized by the Secretary-General, the Deputy Secretary-General, and the President of the General Assembly, as well as inter-agency projects and initiatives. Historically, UN-NGLS has had a specific commitment to enhance the participation of civil society representatives from the Global South and underrepresented constituencies. However, some consultees expressed a perception that the role of UN-NGLS had been fairly lopsided in terms of communication, at least in its early days, and that its role has once again been diminished as a result of recent changes.

There is a long history of further reform proposals. The 1987 Brundtland Commission report, “Our Common Future”, called for a “genuine partnership” between governments, international organisations, and NGOs. In 1992, “Agenda 21”, the outcome of the Rio Summit, established nine “major groups” (Women, Children and Youth, Indigenous Peoples, Non-Governmental Organizations, Local Authorities, Workers and Trade Unions, Business and Industry, Scientific and Technological Community, Farmers) and mandated the UN Commission on Sustainable Development to work to strengthen and formalize them as the main channels through which broad participation could occur.

The 1991 Childers and Urquhart study, “Towards A more effective United Nations” recommended establishing roles for four Deputy Secretaries-General who “should be charged to strengthen the UN’s interaction with outside research, and with the international non-governmental community”. A 1994 follow up “Renewing the United Nations System”, decried the fact that “the Charter provides NGOs with no means of consultation with either the General Assembly or the Security Council.”

In 1997, Gillian Sorensen was appointed to the newly established role of Assistant Secretary-General for External Relations, with responsibility for outreach to non-governmental organizations, and also served as the contact point for the Secretary-General with parliamentarians,

the academic world, religious leaders and other groups committed to advancing the core pillars of the UN’s work. The Office did good work, but the mandate was widely considered to be too large and diffuse, and encompassed too many responsibilities with too few resources. Furthermore, successes of the Office were not followed through with additional sufficient resources to maintain progress. ASG Sorensen was not replaced when she chose to depart in 2003.

In 2004, the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations-Civil Society Relations, headed by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and including senior representatives of civil society such as Kumi Nadoo (then of Civicus), 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 was never implemented, for a variety of reasons, many of them external to the proposal itself. Nevertheless, the idea continued to be developed and championed by organisations who sought to learn lessons from the critics of the idea as articulated in the Cardoso report, in particular with regard to ensuring this role removed barriers to civil society participation and did not risk becoming a gatekeeper for civil society.

In 2013, the General Assembly replaced the Commission on Sustainable Development with the High-level Political Forum (HLPF), established as the “apex body at the UN to ensure monitoring, follow-up and review of the UN’s sustainable development commitments”. UN General Assembly Resolution 67/290 reaffirmed the role of the major groups and other stakeholders, authorising them to “autonomously establish and maintain effective coordination mechanisms for participation in the HLPF at the global, regional and national levels”. The result was the subsequent establishment of the HLPF Coordination Mechanism and Steering Group. In 2015, the UN formally adopted the Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 17: “strong global partnerships and cooperation” and Target 17.17: “encourage and promote effective public, public-private, and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships.”

“While other international institutions, notably the International Labour Organisation (ILO), were set up with a formalised role for non-state representatives, the UN was not.”

In recent years the proposal has been reimagined by a number of different civil society organisations, starting with a report from four members of the Steering Committee of the successful 1 for 7 Billion campaign to strengthen processes for the selection of the Secretary-General² and culminating in a proposal from the Together First consultation on global governance reform,³ which in turn drew from the work of multiple civil society organisations and coalitions.⁴

Meanwhile, support for elements of the proposal has also been building within the UN system: between 2018 and 2020, UN Women and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) conducted a UN-wide online survey, followed by an online consultation in January 2020 on the question of how to protect civic space. In a February 2020 speech and subsequent report, “The Highest Aspiration: A Call to Action for Human Rights” the Secretary-General pledged that he would work towards “creating avenues for civil society participation” and recommended that the organisation “launch a dialogue on more systematic participation of civil society in UN bodies and agencies ... and to design a system-wide strategy on civic space and adequate guidance to UN leaders in the field.”

Building upon this and their previous research in April, OHCHR presented a report to the Human Rights Council, A/HRC/44/25, “Civil society space: engagement with international and regional organizations” which called for the development of a system-wide strategy to protect and enhance civil society space and participation at the UN. Key recommendations include:

- “It is essential for the United Nations to step up ... through a system-wide strategy for the United Nations on protecting civic space.”
- “Ensure that all open sessions of United Nations intergovernmental bodies and mechanisms facilitate effective civil society participation.”
- “Consider how to overcome barriers due to lack of capacity, funding and accessibility; adapt operational practices and arrangements to allow, strengthen and expand opportunities for partnerships, including the possibility of developing joint strategic plans for cooperation between civil society and the United Nations;



Secretary-General Kofi Annan meets with the newly established Cardoso Panel of Eminent Persons on UN Relations with Civil Society in 2003. © UN Photo/Evan Schneider

and put in place “information feedback loops” that enable civil society to provide feedback on the implementation and evaluation of programmatic activities and projects.”

- “Create and reinforce channels for effective participation of different groups in debates and decision-making.”

The HLPF & ECOSOC review process also started in February, with co-facilitators (Benin and Georgia) noting that “many have called for strengthening the engagement of stakeholders in the HLPF and its preparations, including by giving more time to discussions with stakeholders”. Following the onset of the coronavirus, member states decided to postpone the reviews of ECOSOC and the HLPF until the 75th session of the GA, which begins in September 2020.

The UN also took advantage of the UN’s 75th anniversary to hold the “world’s biggest conversation” – a million person strong listening exercise to determine “the future we want and the UN we need”. Among the 10 key findings⁵ were that:

“Dialogue participants overwhelmingly called for the UN to be more inclusive of the diversity of actors in the 21st century. They identified in particular the need for greater inclusion of civil society, women, youth, vulnerable groups, cities and local authorities, businesses, regional organisations and other international organisations.”

As part of the parallel 75th anniversary political process, member states have now mandated the Secretary-General with developing recommendations for the organization, set to be issued before the end of the 75th session of the General Assembly, which could include further work on this agenda. The declaration further said:

“We have to make the United Nations more inclusive and engage with all relevant stakeholders, including regional and sub-regional organizations, non-governmental organizations, civil society, the private sector, academia, and parliamentarians to ensure an effective response to our common challenges.”

“Dialogue participants overwhelmingly called for the UN to be more inclusive of the diversity of actors in the 21st century.”

² Avaaz, Civicus, FES, UNA-UK, “Strengthening civil society engagement with the United Nations”: <https://www.una.org.uk/13-supporting-civil-society-across-un-system-and-beyond>

³ <https://together1st.org/proposals/344>

⁴ Listed *ibid* and in footnote 1.

⁵ <https://www.un.org/en/un75/presskit>

Modalities and considerations for a civil society champion



THE ROLE AND JOB DESCRIPTION OF THE CHAMPION

Similar roles to that proposed (i.e. the UN Youth Envoy), have very short and broad mandates.⁶ While a number of responsibilities have been proposed for this post three core themes were identified:

- **Increasing capacity:** Greater coordination and resourcing for efforts across the Organisation to expand civic space and better engage with civil society.
- **Improving standards:** More consistency in arrangements for civil society engagement across the UN system, with a focus on addressing asymmetries and streamlining practices supported by civil society.

- **Championing new voices:** Increasing opportunities for civil society organisations to engage with the UN, particularly those from the Global South, to ensure that the Organisation hears from new, more diverse and representative voices, and to ensure that those voices are protected from reprisal.

One of the aspects that most excited consultees with regards to what a champion could achieve is to address the asymmetric participation and involvement of civil society in various UN departments and agencies. It was felt that by conducting a system wide audit of civil society engagement mechanisms across the UN and opportunities and threats to civil society space, the champion could make a major contribution.

In line with the Paris Agreement and the Accra Agenda for Action, it has been suggested that the champion should look at the development agenda from the perspective of those the development is intended to serve – bringing their voices into donor conversations as equal partners and helping strengthen local, and more broadly global south, ownership of development – thereby perhaps generating support from the G77 and NAM groups of global south states. In a similar vein there would appear to be a very clear role for the champion in advancing the notion of “people centred” UN peacekeeping – peacekeeping that answers to the “peacekept” communities as much as it does to New York.

Another prominent suggestion was that the proposal for a champion should sit within a broader package of reforms designed to protect and enhance civil society space worldwide, and in particular within the UN, and add substance to the Secretary-General’s civil society strategy. The proposal itself, being eye-catching and easily communicable, could serve a useful function even before implementation in generating the headline for this reform package.

Other suggested duties that should fall under the civil society champion’s area of responsibility include:

- Increasing the capacity of civil society through education, development, and by providing a focal point for queries;
- Being a voice for civil society in senior management meetings and coordinating and convening events and processes such as civil society forums;
- Providing monitoring and analysis of civil society engagement across the UN system through periodic audits, with a view to both uncovering which mechanisms rarely hear from civil society and where civil society representation shows a lack of diversity when it comes to gender, sector or geographic spread. The champion would thereby advocate for civil society engagement and provide greater transparency and openness, particularly with respect to accreditation;
- Making the most of the switch to virtual meetings perpetuated by the Covid crisis, and ensuring that it leads to an increase in both the quality and diversity of civil society engagement. Working with DGC to provide a repository for advice and best

practice – particularly with respect to security – when it comes to virtual meetings and events;

- Implementing the UN’s civil society strategy and contributing to the development of the UN communications strategy.

Meanwhile, one concern that has been raised about the idea is that civil society engagement with the UN Secretariat has the flexibility to be more creative and imaginative if it is more informal, and that formalising engagement opens the door for member state interference, reduces creativity, and means that the nature of the engagement has to be very rigid and stiff. It also risks meaning that one can only talk to safe and tame elements of civil society due to the political risks the UN faces when engaging with elements of civil society that are in bad odour with member states.

While there is some validity to this argument, the fact of the matter is that this kind of informal engagement between the secretariat and civil society only currently works for an elite of civil society organisations who have the level of personal contacts to make informal working effective. Formalising the UN’s relationship with civil society is therefore vital in allowing new voices to be heard. However, to offset the risks ingrained in doing so it may be useful to keep the definition of the role of the champion loose, and to not encumber it with too restrictive a terms of reference. One suggestion is that the champion should be given a broad job description and a monthly report back to the Secretary-General, thereby allowing the Secretary-General and future Secretaries-General to shape the role.

Consultees expressed concern about what is known as “focal point syndrome” whereby the appointment of a focal point for an issue leads to all queries regarding that issue being forwarded on to the focal point, with the effect that the issue is neglected by the rest of the system. To avoid that it is vital that the champion not represent the totality of the Organisation’s attempts to open civil society space, but fit within a broad Organisation-wide strategy. The champion must be empowered to champion the mainstreaming of this agenda across the entirety of the Organisation’s work.

This risks becoming an overly diffuse agenda, not to mention beyond the capacity of a small office. However there is a clear consensus around the three core areas of work, and this should form the basis of the mandate and the priorities for the office.

⁶ In the case of the Youth Envoy “to harmonize the UN system efforts on youth development, enhance the UN response to youth needs, advocate for addressing the development needs and rights of young people, as well as to bring the work of the United Nations with and for youth closer to them.”

THE POSITION AND STRUCTURE OF THE OFFICE OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY CHAMPION

There is a risk in wishing to define the position and structure of the office of the civil society champion too tightly. Looser proposals, which are less prescriptive on details, generally have a greater chance of success in UN reform processes. However, there is a need to sufficiently articulate the proposal, both to establish its credibility, and to allow civil society to define its vision for the role.

Most people envisage the role being at the rank of Under Secretary-General (USG) or Assistant Secretary-General (ASG), with opinions differing as to both which is preferable and how much of a difference that rank would make. An ASG would be cheaper, and could potentially avoid the politicisation that frequently comes with appointments to senior positions – where powerful member states watch closely in hopes of pushing appointments of their nationals. In contrast a USG would come with greater internal clout and standing, but potentially at a greater financial and political cost.

Our consultees felt the question of where the role was based to be much more important than its seniority.

Initially many consultees stated that it was vitally important that they be part of the Executive office of the Secretary-General (EOSG), and not part of DGC, DESA, OHCHR or any other office or department that is not located on the 38th floor.⁷

By doing so, the champion would be able to provide genuine access to civil society at the highest levels of the Organisation, both as a convener and as a champion who would help facilitate a system-wide strategy to protect and enhance civic space at the UN. Consultees made a compelling case that without this level of connection there was a strong risk that the champion would be sidelined.

⁷ The floor of UN HQ where the Secretary-General's office and those of core staff are located, used as shorthand within the UN system for the Secretary-General's inner circle of staff and key advisors.

“Linking the role to the DSG would also link the role powerfully to the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals, and would allow for the role to interact effectively with the UN’s funds and specialised agencies.”



Rally in New York calling on world leaders to raise their ambitions as the UN Sustainable Development Goals. © Action/2015

However that position was strongly challenged in the Stimson Centre workshops. Many participants felt that the closer an appointee was to the EOSG the more politicised they are and the more member states work to frustrate their agenda. Furthermore if, when and as Secretaries-General come and go the first thing they do is reorganise EOSG, and so any position within EOSG is likely to have a limited shelf-life, and to be more dependent upon the whims of an individual Secretary-General than positions elsewhere in the organisation.

It was interesting that both supporters and opponents of placement within the EOSG cited the Secretary-General's Youth Envoy (currently placed within the DGC) as an example – some arguing it shows how a role can be sidelined if it is not in EOSG, others how it could have a significant impact and develop a strong relationship with the Secretary-General without needing to be part of EOSG.

While opinions continue to differ, there seemed to be more voices in favour of a placement outside of EOSG in an independent office. If it were to be placed within EOSG one suggestion was that it should be linked to the Office of the Deputy Secretary-General (DSG), or in the manner of a special envoy or special advisor, where the connection to EOSG is largely notional and the DSG is primarily responsible for coordination. Linking the role to the DSG would also link the role powerfully to the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals, and would allow for the role to interact effectively with the UN's funds and specialised agencies via the Sustainable Development Group. Linking the role to development and the SDGs in that way might also increase support from member states.

Regardless of where the role is placed it is clearly important that it be strongly connected to the key mechanisms of the UN; both outward facing offices such as the DGC, the press office and press spokesperson, and policy and strategy instruments such as the Senior Representative of OHCHR in New York, DESA, the SG's Chief of Staff, and the office of the Deputy Secretary-General.

FUNDING THE ROLE

The champion would need sufficient staffing and resourcing in order to have an appropriate impact; the UN has various examples of senior champions who did not benefit from such resourcing that quickly become afterthoughts as a consequence. But the champion should not need a large staff or a considerable budget – the Office of the ASG for External Relations had significant impact with

only six staff. Based on comparable roles we estimate the cost of the office to be in the region of \$2 million a year, although this could vary considerably. The budget would grow considerably, but may attract additional support, if a considerable proportion of it was earmarked for regranting to support global south and grassroots civil society, both on the ground and in their ability to engage with UN processes.

The champion, like any senior post, could be created by the Secretary-General without member state approval. However, should he want to resource the Office out of regular funds, he would require approval from the General Assembly's Fifth Committee. Therefore, without member state agreement, the post would have to be funded from voluntary contributions.

Extracting money from the Fifth Committee, particularly for civil society, as well as for what might be seen as a back-office role, could prove difficult. While strong arguments were advanced to nevertheless attempt to do so (in terms of freeing up the champion from the need to fundraise or from the influence of donors) a consensus therefore emerged that the post should be voluntarily funded.

Given the nature of the work, it might not be appropriate for funding to be accepted from the private sector, and if too much funding came from too narrow a pool of states it could risk the

perception that the post is pushing a particular agenda. It is therefore important that a broad array of member states and independent foundations, potentially recruited through a group of "friends of the champion", agree to provide voluntary contributions to finance the role. Funding from the global south, even if in merely token amounts, will be vital in developing the role's legitimacy. The group of "friends of the champion" could also advocate for the champion and facilitate their ability to address the General Assembly and Security Council as required.

THE SCOPE OF THE ROLE AND THE LIMITS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Civicus, the global alliance for civil society, uses a fairly expansive definition of civil society: the "arena outside the family, the state, and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organizations, and institutions to advance shared interests". This definition would appear to capture the essence of civil society in the way consultees understood it. The demand was for a champion for non-state and non private sector voices.

It was felt that a champion would be particularly useful for NGOs, and it was pointed out that NGOs are one of the only two of the "major groups" the UN consults with that do not have an obvious focal point or focal agency within the United

Nations family (the other is representatives of local government). But given the importance of the champion reaching out to new and less-heard-from-voices, it was felt that civil society should be broadly defined, not limited to NGOs.

For the same reason, it was felt important to de-link the work of the champion from the politicised and flawed process of UN accreditation, be it through ECOSOC or the DGC. The champion must have the ability to facilitate engagement with representatives of organisations and groups that have not been able to get accreditation due to the opposition of member states. Indeed it is vital that states not be able to dictate who the champion can and can't talk to, and to this end a broad definition of civil society will be required.

However, it is important that this definition of civil society be based upon the idea of civil society as a constituency, and be de-linked from the notion of partnerships that exists within the UN system. In this respect this proposal is narrower than the one presented in the Cardoso report, and the role envisaged would be markedly different also in this regard from the previous role of ASG for external relations.

Multistakeholder partnerships are highly effective mechanisms for effecting change. They can be incredibly successful in delivering services, as evidenced by the impact of Gavi, the global vaccine alliance. However, delivery of services is not the only role for civil society; they can also work as advocates, protesters and watchdogs. This is particularly true of human rights defenders and other activists who perform a representative as opposed to service function. Even those elements of civil society that do deliver services feel strongly that their right to be heard is a consequence of the communities they represent not the tasks they perform.

Therefore, although civil society can and should be understood broadly, this understanding must be de-linked from any notion of "stakeholderism": groups' engagement with the UN should be predicated upon their right to be heard simply by virtue of being civil society – and thus their ability to provide accountability, legitimacy and buy-in from a wider public – not upon what they can do for the UN. Service delivery partnerships are frequently mutually beneficial, but they should not entitle those partners to a greater say within the UN system, or those partners that do not participate to a lesser one. Civil society has a right to be heard in and of itself, independently from any collaboration it may have with the Organisation.



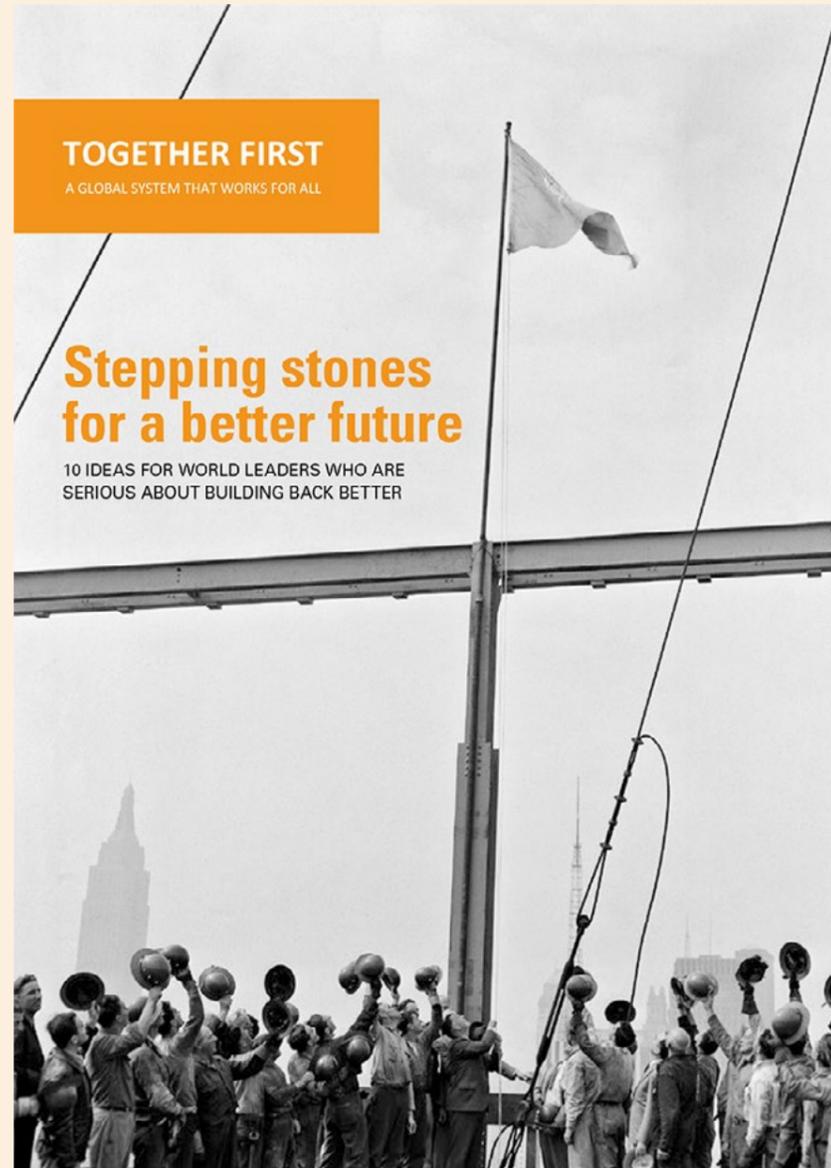
UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed, UN AIDS Executive Director Winnie Byanyima and UN Youth Envoy Jayathma Wickramanayake walk with UN staff, student groups and residents of Port Moresby against gender-based violence. © UN Photo/Andrew Hau

CONCLUSION

There is broad civil society consensus around the idea that the Secretary-General should designate a senior official – at ASG or USG level – to be a champion for civil society. They should be resourced with a small office, with roughly five or six members of staff and a budget of roughly \$2 million a year. This funding should come from voluntary contributions from a broad array of member states – and potentially other sources – who, convening as a “group of friends of the civil society champion” should also provide political backing for the Office. The post should be based in an independent Office outside of EOSG, but reporting directly to the Secretary-General or the Deputy Secretary-General, but must have close working relationships and contacts with the Secretary-General and the major levers of the United Nations system. For this reason the post should be based in New York, but should look to spend as much time as possible travelling the world and meeting civil society.

The task of the champion will be to monitor and assess civil society engagement across the UN System – looking for where there are inconsistencies or roadblocks to deeper engagement, and then work with those elements of the system, and the group of friends of the champion to improve civil society access. The further task of the champion will be to ensure that the UN hears from new, different and more diverse voices by reaching out to those that are currently underrepresented or less heard from at the United Nations. To this end, the champion must have a remit to work with all groups outside of the state and private sectors – without limitation – that together represent the peoples of the world.

Three civil affairs officers of the joint African Union/United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) meet with a group at a Women Community Centre in the Abu-Shouk Camp. © UN Photo/Olivier Chassot



TOGETHER FIRST
A GLOBAL SYSTEM THAT WORKS FOR ALL

Stepping stones for a better future

10 IDEAS FOR WORLD LEADERS WHO ARE
SERIOUS ABOUT BUILDING BACK BETTER

Visit our website to read Together First's previous report "Stepping Stones for a better future"

"Stepping stones" reports on the results of Together First's 18 month long consultation process, and the ten ideas for world leaders that this consultation deems to have reached a "tipping point" moment, where their support could make them happen. It explains how the ideas were chosen, what each idea entails, and where next for our campaign.

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COVER IMAGE Young people "Take the Hot Seat" as part of an Intergenerational Dialogue with UN leaders during a 2019 side event at the Commission on the Status of Women. © UN Women/Ryan Brown

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