

**H.E. António Guterres**

Secretary-General of the United Nations  
United Nations Secretariat Building  
405 East 42nd Street  
New York, NY 10017  
United States of America

*Sent via email*

19 July 2021

Dear Secretary-General,

We are writing on behalf of Together First - an international coalition of over 200 organisations calling for more open and inclusive global governance - to congratulate you on your recent reappointment, and to urge you to act on the results of the UN75 global conversation, including by appointing a United Nations champion for civil society.

Every day, civil society organisations - large and small - support the UN in countless ways. We work on the ground to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, provide essential assistance in humanitarian crises and step into the breach in conflict zones. We advocate for action on the climate crisis and for the rights of those who are ignored and abused. We serve as partners for the UN and as its conscience, encouraging its Member States to act on behalf of the world's 7.8 billion people and of future generations.

As you said so eloquently in your Call to Action for Human Rights: "The UN depends on the active engagement of civil society actors." But civil society has no visible home within the UN structures. It is spread thinly across different parts of the UN system, often those with few resources and little clout. To us on the outside, it appears that the diversity of civil society is still poorly understood within the Organization and that engagement with us is an exercise in box-ticking or confined to the privileged few.

We were heartened by your commitment to "launch a dialogue on more systematic participation of civil society in United Nations bodies and agencies" and to "design a system-wide strategy on civic space," which we hope would apply to space within the Organization too. We were also encouraged by the UN75 global conversation. Many of us engaged our networks in the survey and in dialogue events in all regions. Together First supporters also participated in the "We the Peoples" track of the Our Common Agenda consultation, facilitated by the Igarapé Institute.

For some in our community, this was our first experience of direct engagement with the UN. For others, this was yet another consultation. While we appreciated being listened to, we also want to be heard and to see our ideas reflected in your forthcoming report.

Our coalition is diverse - encompassing large development-focused NGOs and think tanks, as well as youth groups, climate activists, human rights defenders and grassroots peacebuilders, many of them in the Global South. So too are our concerns. But we are united in our call for greater inclusion of civil society, for the protection of civic space and for more support - political, financial and practical - for our work.

In particular, we call on you to appoint a high-level civil society champion. Just as women and youth have benefitted from dedicated envoys and entities with a systemwide mandate, in addition to being "mainstreamed" across the Organization, we believe that such a post would have great symbolic and practical value.

Representation matters. A civil society champion could be a visible - and effective - focal point, especially if given the rank, mandate and resources to empower external perspectives. They could serve as a catalyst for other initiatives - coordinating, streamlining and taking on functions currently spread across the system. They could also support further listening and engagement initiatives that bring in new and marginalised voices. We believe this

should be the norm for the UN, not only an anniversary exercise. Many of our members were surprised that such a position does not already exist. Others have been advocating for its creation for several years.

In early 2016, one of our founding members, UNA-UK, proposed the role similar to the ASG for External Relations be created by the ninth Secretary-General. Along with Avaaz, CIVICUS and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung - New York, they wrote to you about this shortly after you took office in 2017. In 2019 and 2020 we held a global consultation on making the UN more inclusive and the idea emerged as a leading proposal, with growing support from major global NGOs and grassroots, issue-based organisations alike.

We raised it again through the UN75 global conversation, where it gathered further support. It also emerged as a leading idea from the “We the Peoples” track of the Our Common Agenda consultation and it continues to gain momentum, profile and support:

- 52 member states and a diverse geographic spread of 264 civil society organisations support the proposal through the “UNmute civil society” initiative, which calls for broad stakeholder participation to ensure that the voice of everyone is heard – including the most vulnerable and marginalised. To help facilitate this, the UNmute supporters call for the appointment of a Special Envoy for Civil Society to work for civic space at the UN.
- A further 159 civil society organisations support the proposal through the “We The Peoples Call For Inclusive Global Governance”, launched on Multilateralism Day, 23 April 2021. The call asks for the creation of an “office of a UN Civil Society Envoy to enable greater participation, spur inclusive convenings and drive the UN’s outreach to the public and civil society organisations”. Support for this call emanates from the Global South alongside international membership organisations, including Access Now, Action Aid, Asia Development Alliance, Climate Action Network, Democracy Without Borders, Forus, Global Justice Now, Greenpeace, HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement, Latin American and Caribbean Network for Democracy, Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations, World Federalist Movement - Institute for Global Policy and the World Federation of United Nations Associations.
- Major foundations, research institutes and knowledge-sharing initiatives have backed the call, including: Accountability Lab, African Women’s Network for Community Management of Forests, Disability Rights Fund, Global Challenges Foundation, Indigenous Peoples Global Forum for Sustainable Development, Open Society Foundations, and the UHAI-Eastern African Sexual Health and Rights Initiative.

We were encouraged by your 7 May General Assembly dialogue, where you noted the need for a more inclusive UN and outlined as “the next step” the creation of “a mechanism to make sure that we integrate [civil society] contributions in our strategic thinking, in our decision-making process.”

As we look to September 2021 and the conclusion of the UN’s biggest-ever listening initiative, we hope that our call will be heard. The United Nations made clear that this was not a box-ticking exercise but one that would generate concrete action. We urge you to live up to this commitment and appoint a UN champion for civil society, working closely with stakeholders to refine the parameters of the role and participate in the recruitment process.

We would be grateful for the opportunity to meet with a representative of your office to discuss the proposal further. Attached to this letter is Together First’s detailed research report, refined through a series of roundtable meetings with global experts, UN officials and civil society representatives.

Yours sincerely,

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Executive Director of Plataforma CIPÓ

**Natalie Samarasinghe**  
CEO of UNA-UK

*On behalf of the Together First coalition*