

## **Annex 5: Benchmarking report**

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## List of Acronyms

ACTRAV	Bureau for Workers' Activities
CSAG	Civil Society Advisory Groups
CSAP	Civil Society Advisory Panel
CSOs	Civil society organisations
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council
EU	European Union
FRA	Fundamental Rights Agency
FRP	Fundamental Rights Platform
HDIM	Human Dimension Implementation Meetings
HLPF	High-level Political Forum
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisations
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisations
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Conference	The Conference of INGOs
TUAC	Trade Union Advisory Committee
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund

## 1. Introduction

In the framework of the evaluation of the Conference, the benchmarking<sup>1</sup> is a means to provide additional knowledge on the good practices of other international organisations in terms of civil society's involvement. It is not a question of comparing international organisations with each other, nor their procedures, but of comparing the elementary functions of the mechanisms that these international organisations put in place for interacting with civil society. Comparison between different organisations' mechanisms becomes possible when operating procedures and strategies are broken down into elementary functions, which are the subject of the comparison.

The benchmarking is meant to be dynamic. It makes it possible to understand how the mechanisms work so as to ensure the implementation of their functions and how they overcome potential obstacles. It is therefore not a question of merely describing the functions (presenting an existing platform, for example), but of understanding how these functions are implemented in practice (how the same platform facilitates the joint actions of its members, for instance).

This benchmarking seeks to understand how a function judged to be relevant and effective in other organisations could respond to some of the challenges faced by the Conference as well as the added value to the organisation. The efficiency is considered as the level of resources mobilised by the organisation to ensure the production of the outcomes of the mechanism. While the efficiency was not a criterion for the evaluation of the Conference, the benchmarking explored that dimension with a view to identifying potential avenues for development for the functioning of the Conference.

The benchmarking identifies the comparative advantages of international organisations' civil society consultation mechanism, assuming that each mechanism has strengths and weaknesses and no one mechanism can be recognised as a unique reference. Functions identified as relevant and effective for certain mechanisms may prove to be unsuitable for the Conference or may require adjustments.

This benchmarking aims to target the most relevant mechanisms set up by other international organisations, ranging from well-established bodies (Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) at the International Labour Organization) and more informal mechanisms (the civil society Platform of the Fundamental Rights Agency), not necessarily sharing the same thematic issues prioritised by the Conference (the UNFPA, for instance). Thanks to this exercise, international comparative perspectives will be employed as part of the evaluation as well. All evaluation findings, conclusions and recommendations were compared with the outcomes of the benchmarking.

First, this benchmarking study offers a cross-sectional analysis of the different factors determining the efficiency, relevance and added value of the different consultation mechanisms studied given their respective initial mandates (Chapter 2). Second, Chapter 3 reviews the most relevant tools and examples in relation to the engagement and interaction with civil society, specifying the conditions for transferability on a case-by-case basis. For more information on the international organisations' bodies interviewed, fact sheets can be found at the end of this report.

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1. The benchmarking is a process of comparing operating methods and strategies, which proved to work successfully.

## **2. The cross-sectional analysis of the main factors determining efficiency, relevance and added value**

Several benchmarking criteria were identified prior to the interviewing phase. These criteria allowed evaluators to determine key features determining the efficiency, relevance and added value of a mechanism and to see how in practice these features are deployed by organisations and their mechanisms.

### **2.1. The objectives of the mechanism and its degree of formalisation**

The first step to judging efficiency and relevance of a mechanism is to look at its framed objectives, to understand the aim of the mechanism and the flexibility given to it. The objectives of a mechanism define the areas of intervention of this mechanism and the extent to which the mechanism is formalised within the organisation.

When the objectives of the mechanism are aligned with the whole mandate of the organisation, the flexibility and resources given to the mechanism seem to be larger. The consultation mechanism seems therefore to be taken seriously internally and the meetings become less informal and more valued internally.

#### **Box 1. The Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) and the Tripartite Dialogue at the International Labour Organization (ILO)**

The ILO is the only tripartite UN agency, established in 1919. It brings together governments, employers and workers of 187 member states, to set labour standards, develop policies and devise programmes promoting decent work for all women and men.

ACTRAV, a team of specialists with a deep knowledge of the trade union movement, representing the various regions of the world, ensures that the concerns and interests of workers' organisations are taken into consideration in the policy development and activities of the International Labour Office, both at its headquarters and in the field. ACTRAV's role is to consult the workers' organisations to communicate and defend their interests and to ensure that ILO projects and programmes address the needs of workers and their organisations. ACTRAV also keeps the ILO Office informed of developments in the trade union world and ensures its support to workers organisations in pursuing the aims and activities of the ILO. It can be considered as a liaison office; it is a department or a technical unit of the ILO responsible for the communication with the representatives of trade unions. ACTRAV is mandated to organise several events:

- a) the biannual International Workers' Symposium, a meeting gathering trade unionists and other specialists from all over the world to discuss a given topic;
- b) workshops, both at headquarters and in the field, focusing on the areas of activity of the Bureau;
- c) technical assistance sessions to worker delegates to ILO meetings such as the International Labour Conference, the Governing Body or regional and sectoral meetings.

This extensive mandate is due to the importance ILO gives to civil society engagement. Civil society is involved at all levels of decision making in the ILO. The impact workers' unions have is substantial because they participate in the adoption of any document and the whole model of tripartite dialogue is based on consensus. Every party can block the decision and trade

unions have a veto power: Neither the ILO nor member states can ratify a convention without the agreement of civil society.

The entire credibility of the ILO comes from this process built on civil society engagement. The convention needs to reflect the opinion of the whole of society. Moreover, this adds effectiveness to the implementation of every instrument: when you have ownership and have participated at every level of the process you tend to comply better because it is in accordance with everyone's interests. This raises the success rate of the ILO interventions and programmes around the world.

Sources : [www.ilo.org/actrav/about/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/actrav/about/lang--en/index.htm)

Goal or thematic-focused mechanisms are often smaller mechanisms, in terms of resources and number of objectives, but with an institutional role that is often still recognised. However, the scope of their weight is limited to the areas they can tackle during their meetings. The degree to which this recognition is given depends on the institutional or political will of the main organisation to give a voice to civil society. This influences the freedom given to the mechanism as well to choose the activities that meet its mandate and to prioritise its interventions.

## **2.2. The relationship between the mechanism and the member organisation**

The level of autonomy of the organisation is also decisive in terms of its ability to consult civil society at all levels of the mandate, with agenda setting being one key element of a relevant civil society consultation.

The model of consultation mechanism mainly adopted is a co-construction of the mechanism priorities involving the mechanism, its members and the main organisation. Models where the mechanism autonomously decides on its priorities through consultation of its members is not widespread across international organisations. The priorities of the mechanism are restricted by its respective organisation; to either all aspects of the organisation's mandate or to certain key aspects of it determined at the stage of conception of the mechanism's mandate. Moreover, for most of those interviewed who are responsible for mechanisms, agenda setting of mechanisms' meetings needs to be approved by the secretariat.

### **Box 2. The UNFPA Civil Society Advisory Panel (CSAP): a specific channel of advisory on the advocacy strategy**

The Civil Society Advisory Panel (formerly the NGO Advisory Panel) was created to provide a formal mechanism for dialogue between civil society representatives and UNFPA senior management in the frame of the ICPD +25 Nairobi Conference. It served as a strategic advisory body and sounding board on key issues, yet it is not the only channel of interaction with civil society. The role of the panel was to offer civil society perspectives on UNFPA advocacy strategies, advising on new development trends and opportunities and challenges in the external environment, also recommending possible areas for action.

The added value of the panel was its contribution to the process of building the declaration of the Conference. Each of the 14 members was expected to consult with their constituencies to incorporate their comments into the draft document provided by UNFPA. Two points were incorporated into the declaration at the demand of civil society members: abortion and the participation of civil society organisations (CSOs.). These CSOs included a range of formal

or informal stakeholders, such as international and national non-governmental organisations; community-based organisations; philanthropic foundations; faith-based organisations; advocacy groups; trade unions; women's groups; professional voluntary associations.

Sources : [www.unfpa.org/partnering-civil-society](http://www.unfpa.org/partnering-civil-society)

### **2.3. The membership and size of the mechanism**

In general, a recurrent dilemma faced by civil society consultation mechanisms is the trade-off between the representativeness of civil society organisations and the quality and intensity of their participation and engagement.

Certain organisations choose to open their consultation mechanism to any civil society organisation that registers in view of achieving a high degree of inclusion, while others set a list of criteria for admission of the participants, therefore limiting the number of participants for the sake of preserving the quality of selected participants.

Both options have their pros and cons and require different set-ups within the institutions. An open consultation mechanism needs to create different engagement channels for members and to build an incentive system for participants to be active.

A restrictive consultative mechanism requires mobilising resources (paid human resources and time) for the selection process. It also implies the design of a list of criteria to respect in order to become a member.

The organisations that choose a non-restrictive admission policy do also set a common selection criterion. This criterion is related to the adequacy of the expertise of the NGO willing to join compared to the mandate of the main organisation and the objectives of the consultation mechanism. It is an indicator of the relevance of the organisation's participation for the mechanism and the potential added value of this participation. This is not the option taken by the Council of Europe, which seeks first the capacity of the INGO with participatory status to bring value to the debate with civil society and to voice the concerns and needs of civil society (at least part thereof, as no INGO is able to represent the whole of civil society). In this respect, the participatory status has been instrumental in keeping the balance between diversity and added value to the Council of Europe's work and decision making.

#### **Box 3. The UN Women Civil Society Advisory Groups (CSAG): creating a civil society solidarity network**

UN Women Civil Society Advisory Groups are advisory and advocacy bodies that create a civil society solidarity network. There are 42 CSAGs set up or in the process of being set up globally with more than 500 members. The CSAGs are an opportunity for civil society to influence and steer the global gender equality discourse and to use the UN Women's convening role to bring in diverse stakeholders on contentious and emerging issues, as well as strengthen new partnerships.

The selection process for members to the CSAG is clear:

a) The nomination/election/selection of individuals to the advisory groups is to be determined in consultation with civil society networks/organisations in accordance with practices well-suited to local and national contexts to achieve a just, balanced and diverse membership,

including individuals of stature from academia, as well as representatives from grassroots communities; the groups should include strong youth advocates (with a suggested quota of 30%).

b) The advisory groups are to have a manageable number of reputable individuals (women and men) committed to the core values of the United Nations and preferably with strong credentials as gender, development and/or human rights advocates.

c) Members preferably are to have expertise in one or more of the UN Women's priority areas and represent diverse developmental and human rights perspectives.

d) Members are to be drawn from gender equality networks, women's and grassroots organisations, development and social policy think tanks and academia; in order to preserve the integrity and autonomy of the CSAG as a civil society group of eminent women's rights' advocates and gender equality leaders, private-sector representatives and members of government or political parties or government bodies cannot be part of a CSAG or part of any CSAG selection process.

e) Members take part in advisory groups in their personal capacity for a fixed period on a renewable basis and their membership is rotational.

f) Members of the CSAG may belong to organisations that are implementing partners of UN Women. However, the goal must be to avoid conflict of interest. Hence, the CSAGs should not have any oversight, monitoring or decision-making role in UN Women programming activities.

The rotation and renewal of CSAGs' membership is also well determined to ensure continuity, considered to be key for the functioning of the CSAG. In terms of continuity, if there are strong CSAG members who will provide continuity, then a few of them should continue in the new CSAG to share good practices and lessons learned from the previous group. Alternatively, the new CSAG can be composed of entirely new members if that is what is deemed suitable by UN Women. These issues can be decided in consultation with the CSAG members, UN Women country/regional offices and the Civil Society Section at HQ.

Together, UN Women and the CSAG must establish clear action points for follow-up from meetings, for the CSAG and UN Women to accomplish. CSAGs should play a stronger role in mobilising and activism, with UN Women, in cases where women's human rights are challenged. CSAG members must also facilitate UN Women's outreach to and engagement with broader civil society to enlist new advocates and amplify the gender equality goals in countries within regions. The CSAGs' members should, therefore, actively engage with other members (national, regional and global) and provide valuable inputs to the work as needed.

CSAG members join the advisory groups as eminent individuals and not as representatives of their organisations; while they bring the strength of their organisation and constituency to the CSAG, within the CSAG they will operate in their individual capacity as a gender equality leader; the appointment will be for a fixed period of time, on a renewable basis and their membership is rotational.

Sources: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2016/1/civil-society-advisory-groups-csag-strategy>

## 2.4. The channels of monitoring and evaluation of the mechanism

Another key element raised by all interview respondents was the need for a feedback mechanism that allows for a continuous evaluation of the mechanism. The organisations are able to assess the efficiency of the mechanism thanks to output indicators (rates of participation, number of side events organised, etc.). Most interviewed respondents pointed out the key role of feedback questionnaires and informal discussions, as well as internal evaluations in keeping track of the participation and engagement of civil society members in the organisation's activities and mission. Establishing monitoring within the mechanism allows the main challenges to be identified, as well as the appropriate solutions to overcome them.

Another type of monitoring initiative is through external evaluation. It is used by certain organisations to obtain an external opinion on what could be improved in the functioning of the mechanism. External evaluation enables them to receive feedback on implemented activities, based on the initial objectives of civil society consultation mechanisms, and draw recommendations to better reach these objectives.

### **Box 4. Human Dimension Implementation Meetings (HDIM), OSCE: Reinforcing civic engagement in a rule of procedure-based setting**

The meetings are Europe's largest annual human rights conferences to take stock of how states are implementing their commitments in the human dimension. They are organised by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). The ODIHR provides support, assistance and expertise to participating states and civil society to promote democracy, rule of law, human rights and tolerance and non-discrimination. ODIHR observes elections, reviews legislation and advises governments on how to develop and sustain democratic institutions. The office conducts training programmes for government and law-enforcement officials and non-governmental organisations on how to uphold, promote and monitor human rights.

The meetings serve as an open space for NGOs and civil society to voice their opinion and share their concerns with the OSCE through the meetings organised over the two days or the side events they can organise. It is open to any association and free of charge. The only duty is for the organisation registering to be working in the third dimension, declare relevant experience and to have expertise in the topic. Even the organisation of side events is free of charge (without IT services needed or interpretation) but the slots are limited to approximately 100. The purpose of this exercise is to give a voice to civil society organisation and bridge the gap between them and policy makers. Another aspect of this consultation is to take into account the concerns of civil society in the functioning of the OSCE and its activities. The Parliamentary Dimension of the OSCE (OSCE PA) appointed a Special Representative on Civil Society Engagement, Pia Kauma in 2019, tasked with examining the topic of civil society participation and reporting back to the President and the Assembly by the Annual Session in July 2020 on suggested future work by the OSCE PA in this field. One of her first recommendations was for the OSCE's participating states to "open sessions of the Permanent Council to public observation" including through live streaming on the internet. The special representative on civil society engagement also plans to organise individual meetings with some delegations in order to ensure a true follow-up. Moreover, on a country-by-country



basis, the representative promises to monitor developments in the governance or regulation of civil society work.

Therefore, even in the absence of a structured search for feedback through satisfaction forms, the HDIM involves all departments of the ODIHR and its staff in the monitoring exercise. They are expected to voice the comments and concerns of participants internally through informal discussions in internal meetings. The aim of these discussions is to always improve the attractiveness of the meeting. Despite the strict modalities that remain unchanged, ODIHR still has a small power of manoeuvre through at least the management of registrations to be able to answer the needs of civil society.

Sources: [www.osce.org/odihr/hdim](http://www.osce.org/odihr/hdim)

## **2.5. The rights and responsibilities of the mechanism's members**

Another monitoring issue tackled is the monitoring of participants or members' participation. Questions such as what type of recognition to give them and how to improve the quality of their engagement are key to the smooth functioning of the mechanism. Opinions diverge on whether members' participation and engagement should be monitored or not. Participation is often on a voluntary basis and not rewarded monetarily. The main challenge for organisations is to incentivise participation, in order to ensure active participation and quality engagement.

When the consultation mechanism is run by an external committee of civil society organisations, the only duty involved in participating in the mechanism is to attend meetings. Many judge that moral obligation alone is a deterrent for participants to "free ride", once they have been selected to be part of the mechanism's board or other. However, one cannot necessarily "judge" the less active participants as they are often not paid and participate during their free time. Generally, they do so because they are activists and are searching for access to information and to decision makers.

When the mechanism is run internally, the monitoring of participants who are only registered as members becomes even more challenging. Their only responsibilities mostly consist in responding to the consultations from the organisation. There are no real expectations from the members' engagement – except from a volunteer basis. The organisation has no legitimacy to monitor members who have no specific duties.

Incentives for enhanced participation here are varied and depend mainly on the type of mechanism, its objectives and its resources. An exception is the UN NGO Committee that delivers the ECOSOC status, which asks for quadrennial reports from its members as a contribution and as a pledge of commitment.

### **Box 5. The responsibilities of an organisation granted ECOSOC consultative status**

The UN Committee on NGOs plays a fundamental role in providing the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) consultative status. The NGO committee is elected by ECOSOC as a subsidiary body. The committee has 19 members who are elected based on equitable geographical representation. The committee oversees monitoring of the registration process but also the engagement of civil society organisations who were granted the status. It is responsible for preselecting the NGOs applying for ECOSOC participatory status but also for discussing the quadrennial reports presented by NGOs. General and special status NGOs are required to submit a report every four years. It includes information about contributions of the NGO to the work of the United Nations. To emphasise the need to abide strictly by this

requirement, resolution 2008/4 stipulates measures that the council has taken to suspend and subsequently withdraw consultative status from organisations that fail to submit their reports on time.

The emphasis is on the reciprocity of the consultative relationship. NGOs are granted the privilege of participating in a wide variety of United Nations-sponsored events, meetings and activities. In return, they are expected to contribute to the development aims of ECOSOC, and the United Nations at large, based on their relevant areas of experience and expertise. Thus, the quadrennial review presents an opportunity for NGOs to inform member states about their activities in support of the United Nations and, at the same time, to receive feedback from member states on their programme of work, as well as an official acknowledgement of their contribution as partners in development.

The quadrennial review exercise therefore serves as a critical tool in monitoring the relationship between the United Nations and the steadily growing number of NGOs with consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. Only 1 000 NGOs (out of 4 045) – with a Roster status, which is no longer granted – are not included in this device. It is not a monitoring mechanism of NGOs, but submitting the report is mandatory under penalty of being suspended or having the status withdrawn. The NGO Committee takes note of its reception. The committee can ask questions of the NGOs about the report if, for example, a country has a political difference with the organisation and requests emphasis on a particular aspect. However, the relevance of the content of the report is not assessed.

Sources: <https://esango.un.org/civilsociety/displayConsultativeStatusSearch.do?method=search&sessionCheck=false>

In the absence of a monitoring or sanction process, participants are rarely asked to leave the mechanism. The only conditions that seem common across mechanisms are the questions of whether the member is still active in the field of interest for the main organisation (an issue of relevance) or of whether there has been some disrespect of the principles of the organisation. To encourage participation, organisations usually promote and put forward the networking opportunities allowed by their consultation mechanism. Offering organisations more visibility or access to information drives many organisations to join.

Participation is also boosted when the fees of participation are covered by the organisers. This enables attracting relevant participants despite their financial limitations. The added value depends on the judged relevance of their participation and on the format of the event. In events where interaction and exchange of opinions are valued, covering the fees of certain selected participants boosts the quality of the event and enhances its results, but on the margins only. The purpose of the mechanisms, the sense of ownership and value for their own benefits and that of civil society they target are crucial.

## **2.6. The financial resources allocated to the mechanism**

We have seen that offering financial incentives for participants (on a selection basis) can be the most determinant feature for boosting participation. It enables the democratisation of the mechanism by offering access to smaller organisations that may deserve to participate but cannot afford to. The selection criteria set to benefit from this incentive ensures the quality of participants. Yet, the question of available financial resources is important.

Funding methods differ from one organisation to another and depend on the objectives given to the mechanism and the degree of formalisation of the mechanism, which both depend on the true political will to engage with civil society. When the budget lines dedicated by the organisation are not sufficiently funded, most mechanisms rely either on less costly options but not less efficient tools of consultation – online platforms (for example, the Fundamental Rights Platform) – others on voluntary contributions asked from members, the amounts of which might vary considerably from year to year and depend on the interest of members (the NGO Major Group of the UN High-level Political Forum, for instance), or on external fundraising or partnerships (such as the OECD Annual Forum).

## **2.7. The organisation within the mechanism and across the organisation**

Two key elements are essential for the good functioning of a mechanism within an organisation: on the one hand, an effective organisation, information and communication with members of the mechanism, and on the other hand, an efficient articulation between the mechanism and other parallel channels of co-operation with civil society within an organisation.

The purpose of a consultation mechanism is mainly to engage with participants and members and to voice their needs. Many tools have been developed to ensure this: conferences, virtual meetings, newsletters, online consultations, committees of organisations regularly consulting with their constituencies, etc. However, there is no consensus on which of these tools is the most efficient. Therefore, each tool needs to be assessed according to the mandate set by the organisation beforehand.

Some organisations have several consultation mechanisms in parallel. Some are only civil society mechanisms and others involve other stakeholders such as businesses or academia. The existence of synergies or at least communication between the different channels improves considerably the value added to each, as well as the efficiency of the overall consultation done by the organisation. For instance, CSAGs are not the only mechanisms of consultation at UN Women. Other channels for consulting civil society, such as through implementation, exist in order to engage directly with civil society outside CSAGs. The number of members of a CSAG is limited to 25, which normally represent networks of NGOs. But for the consultation to be even wider it needs to encompass smaller organisations and it is sometimes important to go to the organisations directly. However, one guiding principle accompanies every consultation process – it is the diversity of organisations and reaching intersectional actors working on issues such as disability, LGBT rights, and men and boys' organisations, to name a few.

## **2.8. The leverage given to the mechanism and its development**

This criterion was judged as most important by interview respondents to identify the true efficiency and added value of a consultation mechanism: to what extent is the mechanism able to evolve in order to respond to the new requests of its members or a wider target audience?

Constituencies and represented organisations expect from the consultation mechanisms to ask for feedback and to take this feedback into account in their functioning, as well as to adapt it to their identified needs.

<b>Box 6. A mechanism in evolution: The Fundamental Rights Platform (FRP) of the European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA)</b>
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The FRP is a non-binding relationship platform that was created under Article 10 of the FRA's Founding Regulation. It is not a body of the agency or a representative structure. No membership is required to register on the platform, only a few conditions or engagements, such as:

- a) being active in the field of human and/or fundamental rights;
- b) having fundamental rights-related operations within the EU, or in a country that has observer status with the FRA (North Macedonia, Serbia, Albania), or having fundamental rights experience that is relevant for civil society organisations in the EU;
- c) being unreservedly committed to respecting fundamental rights as enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union;
- d) having experience and capacity with regard to the promotion and protection of fundamental rights;
- e) being committed to engaging in a respectful and fruitful dialogue with the FRA and others co-operating through the platform;
- f) agreeing to provide the FRA, upon request, detailed information regarding their work, organisational structure, funding and other governance issues;
- g) refraining from any conduct disrespectful of human and fundamental rights to any person or group of persons.

The FRA seeks thematic input and strategic advice from the platform organisations. It collects such input through online tools (online surveys), meetings, working groups or conference calls. The added value of the platform is evaluated internally by the capacity of the platform to identify the needs of civil society organisation and to tackle these needs, especially the needs they call "niches". The Civic Space consultation, for instance, one of the FRP's flagship consultations, was designed as a yearly meeting of 30 experts to answer the need for a national assessment of the space given to civil society.

Another need of civil society identified through consultation was to be put in contact with other stakeholders, therefore the FRA started organising a large meeting every two years where one third of the participants were civil society, the other third EU institution representatives and the last third state representatives. Moreover, it is not the only existing tool of co-operation.

A data explorer tool was also put in place to provide NGOs with the data needed for them to underpin their arguments nationally and add weight to them with the backing of a European body. The survey results are accessible to registered NGOs.

In order to increase the added value of the FRP, the FRA takes part in informal advisory civil society workshops on civil society consultation. This content group at desk-office level allows the sharing of experiences and the opportunity to learn from the experiences of other organisations. Peer exchange is judged essential in the context of COVID-19 to find solutions to how to engage with civil society in these circumstances.

Source: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/co-operation/civil-society>

### **3. Main tools and examples of positive engagement and interaction with civil society**

On the basis of the benchmarking study, this section will present some of the key mechanisms of civil society consultation from which the Conference of INGOs could draw inspiration. The potential transferability of such mechanisms to the Conference are then presented for consideration briefly. Finally, attention will be paid to their added value and how they can evolve to adapt to new realities.

#### **3.1. Formalising NGO participation**

As shown previously, a key feature for engagement with civil society is formalising the channel of consultation within the organisation. However, when the number of civil society partners increases, managing the interaction becomes challenging. Defining the different types of relationships possible with the partners might be worth exploring.

In the case of ECOSOC status, currently 4 045 NGOs enjoy consultative status and the ECOSOC remains the only main UN body with a formal framework for NGO participation. The ECOSOC consultative status is an accreditation framework under Resolution 1996/31. There are three types of consultative status: General, Special and Roster. General status is given to NGOs that represent large segments of societies in several countries. Their area of work covers most of the issues on the agenda of ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies. These tend to be large, well-established international NGOs with a broad geographical reach. Special status is reserved for NGOs that have a special competence in only a few of the fields of activity covered by ECOSOC. These NGOs tend to be smaller and more recently established. Roster status is conferred on NGOs that have a narrower and/or technical focus and make occasional and useful contributions to the work of ECOSOC or its subsidiary bodies.

Conferring different types of status allows for more civil society organisations to be consulted and for the opening up of access to the discussions to smaller national organisations whose opinion matters, given their expertise, but who would not have been consulted or included without the status. NGOs with consultative status can designate representatives to obtain annual passes, valid until 31 December of each year, allowing them to:

- attend international conferences and events;
- make written and oral statements at these events;
- organise side events;
- enter United Nations premises;
- have the opportunity to network and lobby.

Conditions of transferability: A committee in charge of selection of the organisations is essential for the good functioning of the mechanism. The main tasks of the committee would be to consider applications for consultative status and requests for renewal of membership submitted by NGOs and to ensure the follow-up and engagement of civil society members and monitor the consultative relationship.

#### **3.2. Ensuring follow-up and continuity**

**The OECD Annual Forum Network**, organised by the Directorate for communication and civil affairs, was established by the OECD with a view to creating continuity in the discussions of

the forum. The directorate centralises issues related to civil society interaction in the OECD – even if each directorate also has its own interaction with civil society stakeholders – and intends to bridge the gap with other directorates. It is in charge of sending a newsletter to civil society, consulting civil society partners and managing the online network platform.

There are approximately 300 members of the online network platform, which is not an official mechanism of consultation. The main aim of the network is to allow for civil society representatives and participants to discuss the main themes of the forum throughout the year, even the most problematic and controversial issues that are sometimes not tackled in meetings with member states. This feature of freedom given to civil society to publish its content is really appreciated by civil society partners. Moreover, with the COVID-19 crisis, activity within the forum network increased considerably and civil society members were able to communicate through the platform easily despite the pandemic. The visibility and outreach of certain key articles published on the network's forum is also reinforced by publishing them on the OECD social media platforms.

Conditions of transferability: The Conference of INGOs should plan for a greater investment (time and resources) in terms of follow-up to the consultation mechanism, which would pay off not only for the quality of the interaction but also in the long term for better feedback of information.

### **3.3. Building trust channels**

Institutional and personal trust channels require consultation mechanisms to engage with their members. Engagement is defined as a relationship of communication with and interaction between the mechanisms and their constituencies. It is different from communication relation alone where the mechanisms share quick, good and summarised messages and only communicate around their activities in a newsletter, for instance.

The Fundamental Rights Platform (FRP) of the European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) understood this quickly, especially the fact that most interaction with civil society is carried out virtually through the platform. Yet, a key aspect of engagement with civil society organisations is to build interpersonal trust with representatives of these organisations beyond institutional trust. On top of receiving a weekly newsletter, building a proper engagement with partners is done through direct interaction. It does not mean communicating directly with the 700 organisations registered on the platform; however, if some organisations seem to be absent from events and do not participate in the consultations, a great initiative would be to connect directly with them to understand the reasons behind their disengagement. Adapting the mechanisms to the needs of civil society implies asking partners for their feedback on several occasions. The FRA has also organised small online conference calls with about 50 organisations registered to the platform to brainstorm on what could be done for better engagement with civil society. These small initiatives that are less costly in terms of investment than in time ensure a better engagement with members.

Conditions of transferability: these types of straightforward innovative initiatives would imply a direct relationship with certain key members. It also allows the boosting of the participation of less active organisations. Asking for feedback directly from these organisations also allows the identification of some unnoticed frictions that might prevent certain participants from engaging better.

### **3.4. Organising side events during formal events**

The main aim of the mechanisms is often to bridge the gap between sectors favouring multi-stakeholder approaches. There are formal meetings where representatives of member states along with representatives of civil society are present. In these settings, a key feature is side events, where civil society organisations are given the floor to present their organisations and voice their concerns. On top of being a supplementary opportunity for networking, it is seen as an efficient tool for striking a balance between official sessions where access is restricted and informal networking opportunities. However, a key issue with side events is how their organisation is managed by the mechanism.

During the Human Dimension Implementation Meetings, the OSCE attach great importance to the fact that side events are organised independently and that organisations are not obliged to or prohibited from publishing content. Side events not being politicised is key to untapping the added value of side events as places for the free exchange of opinions.

On the other hand, organisations with ECOSOC status have the opportunity to organise side events beyond just the premises of the UN but at all UN events in member states. The number of side events during official UN events is also very large (around 200 sides events with a majority held by state/NGO collaboration). However, the cost of organising side events is not met by the UN but by the organisations that choose to hold a stand.

Holding side events or even presential meetings might be compromised when the mechanism is not granted a budget from the main organisation. To overcome this constraint, the NGO Major Group of the UN High-level Political Forum asks for financial contributions on a voluntary basis from members, which amount to approximately 50 US dollars per organisation. They accept contributions as well from individuals that are not part of an NGO. With the money collected in 2019, the Global NGO Major Group was able to hold a side event during the High-level Political Forum and pay a fee for the room where it was held. This side event was seen as beneficial to creating continuity with the work done by the NGO Major Group throughout the year.

Conditions of transferability: When it comes to the organisation of side events, the main organisation can choose either to offer side events where all fees are covered or rooms to participants at a fixed fee. This choice depends on the budget of the organiser and on how much they value informal exchanges with civil society partners. These elements also influence the decision to monitor (or not) the content of the side events of partners.

### **3.5. Dealing with financial constraints**

Many mechanisms of consultation with civil society are faced with the issue of a lack of resources. The main solutions to this are: first, to select the main events that need to be organised face to face according to the mandate; second, to select the participants that will be funded; and third, to resort to partnerships for the organisation of the main events.

The OECD Annual Forum, for instance, is planned each year as part of the OECD working programme. However, no budget is provided for it. Yet, to make it as accessible as possible, transport and accommodation fees for those NGOs with the fewest resources are covered. Forum partnerships are therefore essential, especially because the forum is free of charge for participants. The Annual Forum team seeks therefore to build partnerships with all types of organisations: foundations, businesses, NGOs, etc. Some partners renew their investment every year, being satisfied with the forum's result and the outreach they get; other partners tag along occasionally, depending on which country is funding. However, the only participants

funded are civil society organisations, not academic representatives, enterprises or other stakeholders. The fees covered are usually travel costs and accommodation.

Conditions of transferability: Allowing for a channel of temporary partnerships such as Memorandums of Understanding or agreements around contributions to an event is essential to allow partners to invest and for the Conference to become even more attractive and open to all types of organisations. Bureaucracy and rigidity might hamper partnership building.



## 4. Outlook on the organisations and mechanisms examined

Name of the organisation	Related mechanism(s)
<b>European Commission</b>	<a href="#">Civil dialogue group</a> in the framework of the Europe for Citizens programme
<p><b>The Europe for Citizens Civil dialogue group</b> meets regularly and discusses all matters related to the Europe for Citizens programme and to its implementation. It encourages exchanges of experiences and good practices and contributes to the dissemination of the programme's results. It monitors and discusses policy developments in related fields.</p>	
<p>In 2007, the European Agenda for Culture, adopted by the commission, introduced two tools for co-operation in the field of culture at the EU level: The Open Method of Co-ordination with EU member states and a Structured Dialogue with civil society. Through the Structured Dialogue, the commission maintains a regular dialogue with civil society. This dialogue with the cultural sector provides a framework for exchanging views and information and ensures that the voice of civil society is heard.</p>	
<b>European Fundamental Agency (FRA)</b>	<b>Union's Rights</b> <a href="#">Fundamental Rights Platform (FRP)</a>
<p>Recently reformed, the Fundamental Rights Platform (FRP) is a “mechanism of exchange and pooling of knowledge” for facilitating a “structured and fruitful dialogue” between the FRA and civil society organisations from across the EU. It is not a body of the FRA, and there is no “membership”. Civil society organisations (CSOs) can subscribe to the FRP database for the purpose of receiving and giving information and contributing to FRA consultations. Some CSOs, selected by the FRA, can also be involved in the Advisory Panel assisting the FRA's Director in co-ordinating FRP activities.</p>	
<b>International Organization (ILO)</b>	<b>Labour</b> <a href="#">Bureau for Workers' Activities and the Tripartite Dialogue</a>
<p>The unique tripartite structure of the ILO gives an equal voice to workers, employers and governments to ensure that the views of the social partners are closely reflected in labour standards and in shaping policies and programmes. Over the years, there has been a growing demand by constituents for ILO technical support in the field of establishing or strengthening mechanisms for tripartite social dialogue at the national level. The Bureau for Workers' Activities ensures that the concerns and interests of workers' organisations are taken into consideration in the policy development and activities of the ILO. Through the ACTRAV, the ILO supports workers' organisations in the defence and promotion of workers' rights.</p>	

<b>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)</b>	<a href="#">Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC)</a>
<p>The OECD has been working with civil society since it was founded. The OECD's core relationship with civil society is based on co-operation with business and trade unions (Business at OECD and Trade Union Advisory committee). These advisory bodies contribute to the OECD's work in all areas. Significant activities with other representatives of civil society, such as NGOs, think tanks and academia, complement the OECD's formal co-operation with Business at OECD and TUAC: regular consultations, conferences and workshops, and the annual OECD Forum. Both DAC (Development Assistance Committee) members and CSOs identify challenges in working together. DAC members see the high transaction costs of dealing with many small organisations, the duplication of activities and co-ordination between donors and NGOs as the main challenges they encounter in working with NGOs. CSOs raise the lack of clear donor policies as a key issue or challenge with respect to donors. Other issues were the conditions donors set and lack of meaningful dialogue.</p>	
<b>Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)</b>	<a href="#">Human Dimension Implementation Meetings</a>
<p>NGOs are welcomed at many, though not all, meetings of the OSCE. The OSCE is the only international organisation in which NGOs are allowed to participate in human dimension meetings on an equal basis with participating States. NGOs – no matter how small – can raise their concerns directly with governments. In addition, NGOs can hold side events during human dimension meetings in which they can focus on specific subjects or countries in greater depth than in the regular sessions of the event. However, NGO participation in OSCE events is not always perceived as positive: various participating states have objected to what they perceive as negative aspects of NGO participation in meetings, including criticisms of their governments levied by NGOs. This informal mechanism faces criticism from some governments and has not proven itself as able to assess NGOs quality and professionalism.</p>	
<b>United Nations (UN)</b>	<a href="#">ECOSOC status</a> <a href="#">Universal Periodic Review</a> <a href="#">High-level Political Forum (HLPF)</a>
<p>Consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) provides NGOs with access not only to ECOSOC but also to its many subsidiary bodies, to the various human rights mechanisms of the United Nations, ad hoc processes and special events organised by the President of the General Assembly. There are three types of ECOSOC consultative status for NGOs (General, Special and Roster). The Committee on NGOs reviews new</p>	

<p>applications and makes recommendations. Final decision is the responsibility of member states. Currently, 5 451 NGOs enjoy consultative status with ECOSOC.</p>	
<p>The HLPF is the main United Nations platform on sustainable development and it has a central role in the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the global level. It is enshrined in General Assembly Resolution 67/290 and allows CSOs to attend and make interventions in official meetings of the forum; to have access to all official information and documents; to submit documents and present written and oral contributions; to make recommendations; and to organise side events and round tables, in co-operation with member states and the Secretariat.</p>	
<p><b>United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)</b></p>	<p><a href="#">Civil Society Advisory Committee (CSAC)</a></p>
<p>The Civil Society Advisory Committee (CSAC) is an advisory body established in 2000 to systematise the consultation process between the UNDP and civil society actors at the global level. The CSAC has become the main institutional mechanism for dialogue between civil society leaders and UNDP senior management. The CSAC meets annually in New York. Members serve on the committee in an individual capacity, for an average period of three years. Its contribution has helped strengthen the civic engagement dimension of the UNDP's policies and programmes, as well as collaboration between the UNDP and a broad range of civil society constituencies.</p>	
<p><b>United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)</b></p>	<p><a href="#">Civil Society Advisory Panel</a></p>
<p>The Civil Society Advisory Panel (formerly the NGO Advisory Panel) provides a formal mechanism for dialogue between civil society representatives and UNFPA senior management. It serves as a strategic advisory body on key issues and it is renewed on a regular basis. It includes around 14 representatives from national, regional and global NGOs and networks that work on issues related to the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). The panel offers civil society perspectives on UNFPA advocacy strategies, including specific initiatives related to the ICPD agenda. It advises the fund on new development trends and opportunities and challenges in the external environment. It also recommends possible areas for action.</p>	
<p><b>UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women)</b></p>	<p><a href="#">Civil Society Advisory Groups (CSAG)</a></p>
<p>UN Women Civil Society Advisory Groups (CSAGs) are established as advisory and advocacy bodies. Presently, there are 42 CSAGs set up or in process of being set up globally with more than 500 members. The UN Women CSAGs offer the opportunity to create a civil</p>	

society solidarity network that can co-ordinate efforts with UN Women to accelerate advocacy and action to achieve gender equality by 2030. However, CSAGs are not the gatekeepers of UN Women's work with civil society. UN Women will continue to engage with civil society beyond the CSAGs widely, and in different spaces and constituencies; CSAG members are supposed to strengthen their own engagement with the broader civil society and social justice actors and support and facilitate UN Women's outreach, to multiply the impact of common actions.