An Open Call for Strong and Inclusive Civil Society Engagement at UN Virtual Meetings

3 July 2020

The UN has an unprecedented opportunity to ensure continued and improved civil society access and meaningful engagement as meetings and processes are moving online to safeguard public health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

If carried out inclusively and securely, online participation presents an opportunity to widen the number and diversity of civil society actors engaging with UN agencies, mechanisms, and bodies, including after in-person meetings are resumed, as it will remove the resource constraints linked to travel.

We are convinced that, as the Agenda 2030 states, meaningful, diverse and substantive participation of civil society in UN processes contributes to significantly strengthen the multilateral system and aid the realization of the Agenda 2030 at all levels. It is worrying to see, however, that there are escalating limitations on civil society participation and on freedom of assembly and association, with the pretext of the COVID-19 crisis, at national level and attacks on multilateral cooperation and processes at the global level.

The upcoming High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) 2020 will be an important moment where the opportunity presented by virtual engagement can be utilized fully. Since its inception, civil society has worked hard to contribute to and utilize all participation possibilities at the HLPF. We, as the undersigned major groups and stakeholders, civil society organizations and coalitions (CSOs), call on the UN, its agencies and member states to take note of and implement the set of recommendations below to ensure the virtual nature of upcoming meetings do not hinder, but extend the inclusiveness of HLPF for meaningful civil society participation.

Existing barriers and risks to meaningful engagement by CSOs in UN virtual meetings must be acknowledged by the UN, and a plan to address them must be developed and implemented; this plan should be guided by principles of accountability, transparency, equity, and take a rights-based approach. While we understand the technical limitations and logistical challenges that arise, existing barriers and risks to address include:

- Digital divide, including the digital gender divide and rural access to digital platforms
• Timings that favor the Global North, due to time zones
• Language and accessibility
• Lack of digital security, threats to human rights defenders, marginalized groups and people in vulnerable situations
• Inequality in access to information (due to language barriers, technical shortages, public availability of the information, etc.) and spread of misinformation
• Restrictions to civil society access
• Lack of information about changing modalities, timetables and opportunities
• The short turn-around times imposed on civil society for participation

Before finalizing CSO engagement procedures for UN virtual meetings, the UN, its agencies and member states should:

• Actively seek feedback from civil society actors, in all their diversity, when selecting secure and accessible means of communication to engage with them online or by phone
• Engage with and reach out to civil society actors in all of their diversity and scope (e.g., global to grassroots); relying on large international organizations is not sufficient as they can act as gatekeepers (whether intentionally or inadvertently)
• Perform an impact assessment on CSO participation to ensure that civil society space is not limited over time and by any changes in working methods or modalities

To facilitate CSO engagement at UN virtual meetings, the UN, its agencies and the member states should:

• Make available, at least two weeks prior to the meeting, comprehensive and readily understandable information in a variety of languages, at a minimum in all six UN languages, on how to engage with the UN virtually, and test the methodologies used prior to the official sessions (for example, through call testing by UNDESA with participants prior to the calls, preparatory calls for answering technical questions, etc.)
• Take measures to mitigate and respond to the possibility of new and increased risks of intimidation and reprisals targeting human rights defenders, as well as marginalized groups and groups in vulnerable situations, when operating online, and when submitting information to the related mechanisms. Engage the relevant UN human rights mechanisms in these measures as they are implemented at the HLPF and across all sustainable development processes.
• Connect with civil society actors who are less able to acquire the necessary technology and connectivity on their own to provide them with financial and technological assistance, reaching first to the groups left most behind.
• Adopt secure, open, inclusive and accessible communication platforms to protect civil society and ensure participation regardless of technological resources or accessibility needs.
• Clearly indicate how data will be stored and only share participation lists externally if participants have consented to it being shared.
• Ensure that opportunities for participation, real interaction and engagement for both ECOSOC-accredited and non-accredited NGOs should be, at a minimum, as significant and as meaningful as they were in person, with a goal to increase opportunities

In addition, the UN and its agencies, offices, and other constituent bodies should:

• Develop indicators to understand the impact of virtual meeting participation on the meaningful and effective participation of major groups and other stakeholders, and civil society organizations and coalitions, in consultation with those groups.
• Collect, analyze and use diverse data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts to understand participation and broader trends
• Adapt processes based on the data analysis, including towards narrowing and eliminating the digital divide
• Ensure data security and privacy
• Utilize the lessons learned from this virtual HLPF 2020 to establish best practices of sustained and inclusive virtual civil society engagement processes, throughout the year for all sustainable development processes.

In order to ensure that HLPF 2020 can be as participatory and as inclusive as possible, UN, its agencies and members states should:

• Ensure that as many representatives of Major Groups and other Stakeholders as possible are given the opportunity to participate and speak at all official sessions and activities of HLPF, including the thematic sessions and the voluntary national reviews (VNRs). We recommend a minimum of five civil society speakers per session, self-selected by the MGoS mechanism, with an aim for diversity in all its forms.
• During VNR sessions, and throughout the whole HLPF 2020, inclusion of national and local civil society groups, especially from the VNR countries, should be prioritized.

• All civil society speakers should have time to read their questions during the VNR sessions. In the event the Member State presenting a VNR does not have sufficient time to answer, they will provide a written response within a month, to be posted on the HLPF website.

• Because interaction with member states will be limited, and because many of the national VNR processes were gravely affected by COVID-19 crisis, the engagement of civil society organizations at the national level were limited. Taking this into consideration, the alternative reports prepared by CSOs should be made available on the UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform.

• Virtual engagement opportunities should be utilized for a better connection between the sustainable development processes and the human rights mechanisms of the UN. These should be guided by meaningful interactions, such as discussion rooms, and should not be broadcasts or webinars where interaction is limited to chat conversations.

• Information regarding the civil society led events should be made as accessible as the member state led events (e.g. side events, trainings, information sessions)

• Member states should be encouraged to establish follow up mechanisms, even if virtually, including a follow up meeting with civil society, after their VNR at HLPF 2020, to engage them in national implementation and monitoring efforts.

• All meetings shall be inclusive by providing for accessibility needs, such as international sign language translations and closed captioning.

We voice our concern over escalating limitations on civil society participation, freedom of assembly and expression in certain national contexts, and the attacks on the multilateral institutions and processes, under the pretext of the COVID-19 crisis. In the wake of such a time, and taking into consideration the impact of the pandemic on national VNR consultation processes, and regional sustainable development fora, the UN and member states must provide a platform for strong civil society engagement during the HLPF2020.

We, as the undersigned civil society organizations, coalitions and major groups and other stakeholders are ready to collaborate and cooperate for increased inclusivity and meaningful participation, and in the implementation of SDGs, especially at this challenging time for all. We call on the UN, its agencies and the member states to take these relevant measures to ensure this participation. We must not miss this opportunity to meet the call to leave no one behind!
Organization, Country/Region

28 Too Many, United Kingdom
ABAAD-Resource Center for Gender Equality, Lebanon
ActionAid International, South Africa
Action for Sustainable Development, United Kingdom
Africa 2063 Association, Cameroon
African-Asian Rural Development Organization (AARDO-NIGERIA), Nigeria
African Centre for Human Rights Education (CAEDHU), Senegal
African Coalition on Green Growth, Uganda
African Youth Commission, The Gambia
Africa Young Positives Network (AY), Uganda
Afrihealth Optonet Association, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya
Aid Organization, Bangladesh
Airwars, United Kingdom
ALTSEAN-Burma, Malaysia
American Pakistan Foundation, United States of America
Angel Support Foundation, Nigeria
Arab Women Network for Parity and Solidarity, Egypt
ARC International, Global
Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW), Malaysia
Asia Pacific Alliance for SRHR, Thailand (Regional)
Asia Pacific Women’s Watch (APWW), Asia Pacific Regional
Asociación Ciudadana ACCEDER, Costa Rica
Asociación Ciudadana por los Derechos Humanos, Argentina
Asociación de Mujeres Indígenas Kunas, Panama
Asociación Red de Jóvenes para la Incidencia Política (INCIDEJOVEN), Guatemala
Association d'Aide à l'Éducation de l'Enfant Handicapé (AAEEH), France
Association des Femmes de l'Europe Méridionale (AFEM), France
Association for Progressive Communications, South Africa
Association for Promotion Sustainable Development, India
Association for Single Mothers (ASMO), Kenya
Association Montessori Internationale, France
Association Nationale AL HIDN, Morocco
Association Nationale des Partenaires Migrants, Sénégal
Association pour le Développement Culturel (ADEC), Chad
ASTRA Network, Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia
Aube Nouvelle pour la Femme et le Développement (ANFD), Democratic Republic of Congo
Autistic Minority International, Switzerland
Balance Promoción para el Desarrollo y Juventud, Mexico
Bangladesh Indigenous Women’s Network, Bangladesh
Barnabas Charity Outreach, Nigeria
BirdLife International, UK
BPW BRASIL, Brasil
Bright Women, Portugal
British Association of Women Entrepreneurs (BAWE), United Kingdom
Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, USA
Business and Professional Women, United Kingdom
Cameroon Education For All Network, Cameroon
Carbone Guinée, Guinea
Caribbean Male Action Network (CariMAN), Caribbean Region
Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR), United States of America
Center Women and Modern World, Azerbaijan
Centre for Democracy and Democracy, Nigeria
Centro de Derechos de Mujeres, Honduras
Centro de Estudios e Investigación sobre Mujeres, Spain
Centro de Investigaciones para la Equidad Política Pública y Desarrollo (CIPE), Mexico
CERPAC, Republic of Congo
Champion Youth, Liberia
CHIRAPAQ, Center of Indigenous Cultures of Perú, Peru
CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, Netherlands
Christian Aid, Ireland
Christian Aid, United Kingdom
Civil Society Advance Forum on Sustainable Development (CAS2030), Nigeria
Civil Society Coalition on Education for All, Nigeria
Civil Society Financing for Development (FfD) Group, Global
Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS), The Netherlands
COC Nederland, The Netherlands
Colectivo "Genero y Teologia para el Desarrollo", Bolivia
Colectivo Mujeres Puerto Vallarta, Mexico
Collectif Sénégalais des Africaines pour la Promotion de l'Education Relative à l'Environnement (COSAPERE), Senegal
Combined Social Network, Bangladesh
Comité de América Latina y el Caribe para la Defensa de los Derechos de las Mujeres, (CLADEM), Latin America and Caribbean Region
Community Action on Sustainable Development Initiative, Nigeria
Community Initiatives for Development in Pakistan, Pakistan
Community Science Centre - Vadodara, India
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, México
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, United States of America
Consortium Humanitarian Agency, Sri Lanka
Consortium Of Women Entrepreneurs Of India, India
Consultancy on Human Rights & Gender Issues, Germany
CoopeSoliDar R.L, Costa Rica
Coordinadora 28 de Mayo, Guatemala
Coordinadora de la Mujer, Bolivia
Counselling Line for Women and Girls, Albania
Creación Positiva, Spain
D.C. Unit Church Women United, United States of America
DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project), Uganda
Diverse Voices and Action (DIVA) for Equality, Fiji
DoNation, India
Dr Uzo Adirieje Foundation (DUZAFOUND), Nigeria
Dukingire Isi Yacu, Burundi
Echoes of Women in Africa Initiatives, Nigeria
Egyptian Feminist Union, Egypt
Eidos Global, Uruguay
Elige Red de Jovenes por los Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos, Mexico
Elimu Kwanza Initiative, Kenya
Emmaus International, Zimbabwe
EMPOWER INDIA, India
Environmental Protection Promoters Initiative (EPPI), Nigeria
Equal Asia Foundation, Thailand
Equality Bahamas, The Bahamas
Equal Measures 2030, Kenya
Equidad de Género: Ciudadanía, Trabajo y Familia, Mexico
European Network of People of African Descent (ENPAD), Sweden
Faith to Action Network, Kenya
Family Education Services Foundation, United States of America
Family Organization for Empowerment (FOREM), Kenya
Family Planning NSW, Australia
FAWCO, Austria
Federación de Mujeres Municipalistas de América Latina y el Caribe (FEMUM ALC), Peru
Federación Planificación Familiar Estatal, Spain
Federation of Environmental and Ecological Diversity for Agricultural Revampment and Human Rights (FEEDAR & HR), Cameroon
FEEdar & HR MCUCOOP with BOD, Cameroon
FEMNET, Kenya
Fiji Women's Rights Movement, Fiji
Focus on Women Magazine, United States of America
FOKUS - Forum for Women and Development, Norway
Fondation EBOKO, France / Congo
Fondo Semillas, Mexico
Foro Ciudadano de Participación por la Justicia y los Derechos Humanos (FOCO) - Instituto de Participación y Desarrollo (INPADE), Argentina
Foundation for Building Sustainable Communities, Canada
Fundació Aroa (Aroa Foundation), Spain
Fundación Arcoiris por el Respeto a la Diversidad Sexual, Mexico
Fundación Colectivo Hombres XX, Mexico
Fundación Global, Argentina
Fundación Mujer y Mujer, Ecuador
Fundación para Estudio e Investigación de la Mujer (FEIM), Argentina
Fundación PLURALES, Argentina
Fundación SIDOM, Argentina
Fundación Unidas: Mujeres Construyendo Tejido Social, Colombia
Fund of Women Entrepreneurs, Georgia
FUSA AC, Argentina
G.R.A.C.E Foundation, Zimbabwe
Gabidezin House Of Fashion-Boadi, Ghana
Gatef organization, Egypt
Gemstone Tech Tutors, Nigeria
Gender-Centre, Republic of Moldova
Gender Justice Consultancy, The Netherlands
Gestos– HIV, Communication and Gender, Brazil
Ghalayini for Trade & Turnkey, Lebanon
Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, Thailand
Global Ecovillage Network, United States of America
Global Goals Institute, New Zealand
Global Network of CSOs for Disaster Reduction, Global
Global Socio-economic and Financial Evolution Network (GSFEN), Nigeria
Global Youth Organisation, India
Greenation for Environmental Development, Egypt
Green Hope Foundation, Canada
Greenspring Development Initiative, Nigeria
Grob, United States of America
GROOTS T&T, Trinidad & Tobago
HaritaDhara Research Development and Education Foundation, India
Hawaii Institute for Human Rights, United States of America
Healthier Hearts Foundation, India
Herstoire Collective, Saint Lucia
Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA), Pakistan
IFFI Samar, Mexico
Inclusive Climate Change Adaptation for a Sustainable Africa, Kenya
Indigenous Information Network, Kenya
Institute of Gender, Law and Development (INSGENAR), Argentina
Instituto Chi Pixab, Guatemala
International Alliance of Women, Greece
International Communication Center, Nigeria
International Council for Adult Education, Serbia
International Council of Women, Switzerland
International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), France
International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) World, Global
International Movement ATD Fourth World, United States of America
International Organization of Women, Switzerland
International Partnership and Development Organization, Russia
International Planned Parenthood Federation, United Kingdom
International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), Brussels
International Women’s Anthropology Conference (IWAC), United States of America
International Women's Development Agency (IWDA), Australia
International Women's Forum, Turkey
International Women's Health Coalition, United States of America
International Women’s Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAW Asia Pacific), Malaysia

International Youth Alliance, Bulgaria

Ipas, United States of America

Ipas Centroamérica y México (Ipas CAM), México, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panamá

ISHR, United States of America

Itaka Initiative, Nigeria

Japanese Organization for International Cooperation in Family Planning (JOICFP), Japan

Jolen Press, United States of America

Journalists for Human Rights, North Macedonia

Just Associates, South Africa

Just Associates (JASS), Global

Justice Call Foundation, Egypt

Kevoy Community Development Institute (KCDI), Jamaica

KINDERENERGY, United States of America

Korean Disability Forum, Republic of Korea

Kothowain, Bangladesh

Kulmiye Aid Foundation, Somalia

L'Associacio de Drets Sexuales i Reproductius, Spain

LandSea Maldives, Maldives

Lanka Fundamental Rights Organization, Sri Lanka

Latin America and Caribbean Women’s Health Network (LACWHN), Latin America and Caribbean Region

Let There Be Light International, United States of America

LGBT Centre, Mongolia
LOTS Charity Foundation, Nigeria
Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights, Egypt
MadreEmprendedora, Argentina
Make Mothers Matter, International
Mama Cash, The Netherlands
Mandy Sanghera Foundation, United Kingdom
Marie Stopes International, United Kingdom
Medical IMPACT, Mexico
Medical Students Association of India, India
MENA Rights Group, Switzerland
MenEngage Alliance, United States of America
Mind Reformers Network, Nigeria
Mitini Nepal, Nepal
Moravian College, United States of America
Morya Samajik Pratishthan, India
MPact Global Action for Gay Men’s Health & Rights, United States of America
Mujeres Guerrerenses por la Democracia, Mexico
Mujer y Salud en Uruguay (MYSU), Uruguay
MURNA Foundation, Nigeria
MY World Mexico, Mexico
Nafas LGBT Azerbaijan Alliance, Azerbaijan
National Board of Catholic Women, United Kingdom
National Campaign for Sustainable Development Nepal, Nepal
National Campaign for Sustainable Development Nepal, Nepal
National Youth Council of The Gambia, The Gambia
NawaEnergy, Indonesia
Network of Rural Women Producers - Trinidad and Tobago, Trinidad & Tobago
NetWwater, Sri Lanka
NGO Major Group, Global
NGO Parastor, Tajikistan
Nigerian Youth Climate Network, Nigeria
Noble Missions for Change Initiative, Nigeria
North Star NGO, Jordan
NQBSS Livestock Breeders, Zimbabwe
Observatorio de Género y Equidad, Chile
ONG PADJENA, Benin
Orchid Project, United Kingdom
Organización de Mujeres Tierra Viva, Guatemala
Osi Joe Touching Lives Initiative, Nigeria
OutRight Action International, United States of America
PA Women's Organization Alga, Kyrgyzstan
Peace Actor Network, Nigeria
Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement, Philippines
Plan International, Global
Plataforma Derechos Aquí y Ahora Honduras, Honduras
PODER, Mexico
Poverty Reduction Forum Trust, Zimbabwe
Presentation Sisters Ireland & UK, Ireland
Projonma Academy, Bangladesh
Psychology of Science in Policy, United States of America
Raks Thai Foundation, Thailand
Red Agenda 2030 MX, México
Red de defensoras del ambiente y el Buen Vivir, Argentina
Red de Educación Popular entre Mujeres (REPEM-LAC), Bolivia
Red Dot Foundation, India
Red Dot Foundation Global, United States of America
Red Juvenil de AMUGEN, Guatemala
Red Nacional Jóvenes de Ambiente, Colombia
Red por los Derechos Humanos de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes (REDHNNA), Venezuela
Regional Center for International Development Corporation (RCIDC), Uganda
Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, United States of America / International RESURJ, Brazil
Rural Area Development Program (RADP), Nepal
Rutgers, The Netherlands
Saathi Sanga Manka Kura, Nepal
Saferworld, United Kingdom
Sahara Welfare Foundation, Pakistan
Sanctus Initiative for Human Development and Values Sustainability (SIHDEVAS), Nigeria
Sangram Sanstha, India
Santé et Action Globale, Togo
Sarthak Educational Trust, India
Save the Children International, United States of America
SDGs National Network Nepal, Nepal
See Other Sides Consulting, United States of America
Services for Rural Development and Agriculture (SEDRTA), Chile
Sex og Politikk / IPPF Norway, Norway
Shareteah Humanitarian Organization – SHO, Iraq
Shevolution, United Kingdom
Shirley Ann Sullivan Educational Foundation, United States of America
Shishu Aangina, Bangladesh
Sistren Theatre Collective, Jamaica
Social Economic and Governance Promotion Centre, Tanzania
Social Watch / Contrôle Citoyen au Bénin, Bénin
Society for Conservation and Sustainability of Energy and Environment in Nigeria (SOCSEEN), Nigeria
Society for the Improvement of Rural People (SIRP), Nigeria
Sombrilla Centroamericana, Central America Region
Sonke Gender Justice, South Africa
Soroptimist International, Canada
Soroptimist International, United Kingdom
Soroptimist International, United States of America
Southern Africa Climate Change Coalition, Botswana
Special Talent Exchange Program, Pakistan
SRJC, South Africa
SRS Livestock Development Foundation, Zimbabwe
Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities, Global
Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA Network), Uganda
Student of international relations and conflict resolution, Chad
Sukaar Welfare Organization, Pakistan
Suma Veritas Foundation, Argentina
Support on AIDS & Life Thru Telephone Helpline (SALT), Uganda
Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF), Thailand
Sustainable Healthy Habitants & Healthy Humans for Peace (SH4P), Switzerland
Tamazight Women’s Movement, Libya
The FAAAT Archive, France/Spain
The Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) Pacific, Fiji
The Great Green Kouno Dagal Wall (GGKDW), Chad
The Heritage Institute of Policy Studies (HIPS), Somalia
The Kota Alliance, United States of America
The Millennials Movement, Peru
The Missing MDG initiative, United States of America
The Regla Project, Philippines
Together 2030, Global
Uganda Coalition for Sustainable Development, Uganda
UNANIMA International, Global
Unchained at Last, United States of America
United States Sustainable Development Corp, United States of America
Univers des Jeunes, United States of America
UN Major Group for Children and Youth, Global
Urgent Action Fund for Latin America and the Caribbean, Latin America Region
Vecinas Feministas, Argentina
Virtuous Woman International, El Salvador
VIVAT International, United States of America
Voces de Mujeres Afrodescendientes en Panamá, Panama
Voice of The Vulnerables, Nigeria
WACUNA-UK, United Kingdom
Water Justice & Gender, The Netherlands
WiLDAF-AO, Togo
Woman In Media - Newark, United States of America
Womankind Worldwide, United Kingdom
WO=MEN Dutch Gender Platform, The Netherlands
Women’s Coalition - Turkey, Turkey
Women’s Consortium of Ukraine, Ukraine
Women’s Earth and Climate Action Network, United States of America
Women’s Environment & Development Organization, United States of America
Women's Human Rights Education Institute, Costa Rica/Canada
Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Global
Women's Rehabilitation Center (WOREC), Nepal
Women's Studies Research Centre - The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
Women's Support and Information Centre NPO, Estonia
Women's World Summit Foundation, Switzerland
Women Against Rape, Antigua & Barbuda
Women and Girls of African Descent Caucus, Americas and the Caribbean, United States of America
Women Educators Association of Nigeria, Nigeria
Women Engage for A Common Future (WECF), The Netherlands
Women Entrepreneurs Association Turkey (KAGİDER), Turkey
Women for Fair Development, Malawi
Women for Peace and Ecology, Germany
Women for Water Partnership (WfWP), The Netherlands
Women for Women's Human Rights - New Ways, Turkey
Women Rights and Sustainable Society, Nigeria
Women Solidarity Namibia (WSN), Namibia
World Animal Net, United States of America
World Benchmarking Alliance, The Netherlands
World Distribution Federation (International Economic Organization), Republic of Korea
World Institute on Disability, United States of America
World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Global
Young Changemakers Foundation, Nigeria
Young Shapers, Pakistan
Youth Advocacy Network (YAN), Pakistan
Youth Advocates Ghana-YAG, Ghana
Youth Approaches to Health Association(Y-PEER Turkey), Turkey
Youth Christian Lawyers, Pakistan
Youth For Environment Education And Development Foundation (YFEED Foundation), Nepal
YUWA, Nepal
Zimbabwe Climate Change Coalition, Zimbabwe