

**Input to the Report of the High Commissioner
“Civil society space in multilateral institutions”
by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)**

In response to the call for inputs to the report of the High Commissioner on “Civil society space in multilateral institutions”, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) would like to highlight its work with civil society organisations. FRA deals with fundamental-rights issues in the European Union and in its Member States when implementing Community law. Its mandate is to provide EU institutions and EU Member States with assistance and expertise on fundamental rights, and part of the working method includes systematic cooperation with civil society.

In response to the call for inputs, and in particular the aspects highlighted (paragraph 89 of the High Commissioner’s 2016 report on “Practical recommendations for the creation and maintenance of a safe and enabling environment for civil society, based on good practices and lessons learned”, (a)–(d)), below some concrete examples from FRA’s work with civil society organisations:

(a) Ensure safe premises for civil society and provide advice in cases of threats, intimidation or reprisals;

Within the EU, fortunately, this is not a major concern.

FRA’s Director visits 4–6 EU Member States per year (in 2017: Estonia, Finland, Hungary and Poland). These visits usually include meetings with civil society organisations. These meetings take place either in the premises of EU Representations to the country, or in another neutral and “safe” space.

(b) Throughout their activities and processes, provide for the effective participation of civil society, in conformity with international standards of non-discrimination, the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly and the right to participate in public affairs;

The Fundamental Rights Platform (FRP) is FRA’s channel for cooperation and information exchange with civil society organisations working on fundamental rights – at the national, grassroots, European and international level. It allows for information exchange and the pooling of knowledge – thereby maintaining an open, transparent and regular dialogue with civil society. It enables civil society organisations to establish direct channels with FRA and its work, and to connect with other civil society organisations. FRA’s cooperation with civil society is defined in Article 10 of its [Founding Regulation](#) – which is EU law, and is detailed in the [Terms of Reference](#) established by FRA for the FRP. The Platform was established in the same year as FRA was founded, in 2007.

The FRP is not a body of FRA, and there is no “membership”. Civil society organisations can register in the FRP database, for the purpose of developing a structured relationship and exchange of information with FRA. Currently (November 2017), over 550 organisations are registered in the FRP database.

As per FRA's Founding Regulation, FRA co-operates with civil society organisations beyond NGOs:

- non-governmental organisations dealing with human rights
- trade unions
- employers' organisations
- relevant social and professional organisations
- churches, religious, philosophical and non-confessional organisations
- universities and other qualified experts of European and international bodies and organisations.

Civil society organisations (CSO) can register to the FRP database, under the following conditions (Art. 1 (3) Terms of Reference):

- a) be active in at least one of the EU Member States, or in a State holding observer status with FRA [note – no requirement of formal registration];
- b) be unreservedly committed to respecting fundamental rights as enshrined for instance in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the European Convention on Human Rights and to working for their advancement, protection and promotion;
- c) have experience and capacity with regard to the protection and promotion of these rights;
- d) be committed to raise awareness of the fundamental rights issues addressed by FRA;
- e) be able, for the sake of transparency, to provide FRA on request with detailed information regarding their organisational structure and financial sources;
- f) refraining from any conduct going against the fundamental rights of any person or group of persons, as are recognized by the Charter and the subsequent interpretations by the authoritative bodies.

Methods of cooperation, dialogue and exchange of information include:

- Information exchange (newsletters, reports, communicating through frp@fra.europa.eu, social media, etc.).
- Meetings: thematic meetings, Fundamental Rights Forum, Agency country visits, inviting FRA speakers to key events by civil society organisations, CSOs contributing to/speaking at FRA events.
- Contributing to FRA projects from beginning to end (conceptualization phase; expert input, dissemination, implementation).
- Consultations: on Agency work plans, on its annual Fundamental Rights Report and on FRA's Multi-Annual Framework.
- Communicating outcomes and recommendations of civil society conferences, seminars and meetings relevant to the work of the Agency to the Director and the Scientific Committee.
- Capacity building for civil society organisations, in particular in view of enabling appropriate 'civic space' and regarding the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.
- Advising FRA's Director on the Agency's cooperation with civil society, through the Platform's [Advisory Panel](#) (AP). The nature of the AP is consultative - it has no representative role on behalf of the FRP or the FRA. The Panel consists of a maximum of 11 full members, plus

observers. Six of the full members are elected by the FRP organisations every two years (all registered organisations can vote and stand for elections), and up to five are appointed by the FRA Director, in order to ensure a wide diversity of types of organisations, thematic areas, gender balance, geographical representation, and international/EU, national and regional/grassroots levels. Membership in the AP is for a period of up to three years, the term can be renewed once. The AP meets twice per year.

FRA is continuously trying to improve ways of engagement with civil society organisations both in its regular work, as well as when stepping up work on civil society space. The strategic direction for FRA's enhanced cooperation with civil society has been developed jointly with the FRP, notably its Advisory Panel, through a series of workshops in 2014 and 2015. Feedback from the Platform and the AP about the Agency's approach to, and cooperation with, civil society has consistently been very positive.

The entire stakeholder engagement team has been trained in participatory engagement methods. FRA has shared its experience and practices on civil society cooperation within the network of EU Agencies, with the aim to allow Agencies to exchange promising practices and lessons learned regarding civil society cooperation. FRA also participates in the new informal network of practitioners on civil dialogue, which has been initiated in autumn 2017 by the European Commission's Secretariat General together with the EESC (European Economic and Social Committee), bringing together those public officials across different EU institutions who are responsible for cooperation with civil society.

(c) Expand the transparency, through such means as webcasting, of public meetings, including, for example, meetings of the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations of the Economic and Social Council;

FRA is usually live streaming all its larger events – such as notably its biannual Fundamental Rights Forum (<http://fundamentalrightsforum.eu/>), as well as its major report launches.

Regarding for instance thematic stakeholder/expert meetings, usually meeting reports are made available on FRA's website: (examples: Report from expert meeting on communicating rights, May 2017: "How to better communicate common values, fundamental rights and freedoms", <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2017/how-better-communicate-common-values-fundamental-rights-and-freedoms-meeting-report> ; or "Exploring the connections between arts and human rights", <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2017/exploring-connections-between-arts-and-human-rights-meeting-report>)

All other relevant documents, such as FRA's Founding Regulation, Annual Work Programmes, Annual Activity Report, cooperation agreements, public procurement etc., as well as all documents relevant to FRA's bodies (Management Board, Executive Board, Scientific Committee) are available on FRA's website in the Register of Documents. <http://fra.europa.eu/en/about-fra/register-of-documents>

(d) Mainstream regular monitoring, review and public reporting on civic space issues and challenges across all entities.

In the framework of its cooperation with civil society, FRA initiated in autumn 2016 a project on enabling and protecting civil society space (with a focus on EU Member States, as per its mandate). In May 2017, FRA brought together 40 experts, including from the UN's Human Rights Office (OHCHR), to give greater precision to the nature of the challenges and help to identify existing or elaborate new measures that could contribute to safeguarding civil society space in EU Member States. Further analysis and desk research was conducted, resulting in a **report on "Challenges facing civil society organisations working on human rights in the EU"**, which is scheduled for publication on 18 January 2018. With this report, FRA aims to raise awareness about the challenges and risks for civil society organisations across the EU, but also about promising practices. The report looks at the challenges facing civil society organisations in the EU in five categories, which broadly mirror the five conditions elaborated by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights necessary for creating and maintaining civil society space. The OHCHR kindly offered useful input on a draft version of the report, through the Special Rapporteurs on the situation of human rights defenders, on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, and on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. FRA will follow up on this report with policy makers, public administrations, EU and international organisations including the OHCHR, as well as with civil society organisations. A FRA survey among FRP organisations on their perceptions and experiences regarding civil society space in the EU is planned for autumn 2018.