

UN-Habitat's work with civil society: innovative engagement promoting knowledge and cooperation

1. Introduction

UN-Habitat has strong partnerships with civil society in its normative and operational work, including promoting cooperation on specific action-oriented platforms for sustainable urbanization, as well as advisory bodies to the agency's strategy and policies. Civil society engagement is particularly crucial for UN-Habitat in order to encourage a people-led process, which puts people and communities at the center of post-disaster and post-conflict recovery to build back better.

In particular, civil society fulfills the following key functions when working with the United Nations:

- Civil society organizations have a crucial role in promoting the United Nation's objectives. They can contribute to the forming of agreements and interventions on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals while ensuring active participation among rights holders;
- Civil society organizations can provide important contributions to the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals by locally implementing global level activities and thus ensuring that the Goals are implemented at the local level. Other important aspects of their local role include monitoring and evaluation;
- While the United Nations has numerous partners in government, private sector, donors and others, civil society organizations are the most imperative in the context of advocating for vulnerable groups who may otherwise be excluded or marginalized from participation, such as persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees, women at risk of being subjected to human rights violations, children etc.;
- Civil society organizations may have the added advantage of being more closely linked with grassroots level organizations and individuals than the United Nations and as such, they can contribute to increasing the effectiveness of United Nations' interventions at local level, while boosting the United Nations' visibility and reputation;
- Civil society can play a crucial role in the design, implementation and evaluation of sustainable development projects.

2. Civil society knowledge and expertise in sustainable urbanization

The largest stakeholders' Forum on urban issues is convened by UN-Habitat.

a) World Urban Forum (WUF)

The World Urban Forum (WUF) is the world's premier platform on urban issues. It is a non-legislative technical forum convened by UN-Habitat since 2002. The Forum, an advocacy platform, has become one of the most open international gatherings for exchanging views and experiences on urban challenges.

The inclusive nature of the Forum makes it a unique United Nations meeting and the foremost global arena for interaction among policymakers, local government leaders, non-governmental organizations and expert practitioners in the field of sustainable urban development and human settlements.¹

The Forum is held in a different host city and country biennially, specifically in the years when the Governing Council of UN-Habitat is not held. The participation in the Forum has significantly increased in last years and steadied at around 18,000 participants from all over the world.

The main objectives of the WUF are raising awareness on sustainable urbanization, improvement of collective knowledge on sustainable urban development through inclusive urban debates, sharing lessons learnt, urban solutions and policies, and the increase of coordination and cooperation between stakeholders and constituencies.²

The role of civil society, which also serves on the WUF advisory board, is recognized as being part of its main sessions. The WUF is an advisory body to the Executive Director of UN-Habitat and its recommendations are submitted to the UN-Habitat's Governing Council for endorsement and onward noting by the General Assembly of the United Nations.

b) Multi-stakeholder thematic partnerships

UN-Habitat has created several multi-stakeholder issue-based networks as vehicles to include partner's expertise, including civil society partners, in normative and operational activities and programmes.

Key networks include for example: the Global Water Operators Partnership (GWOPA), the Global Land Tool Network (GLTN), The Global Energy Network (GENUS), the Global Safer Cities Network, UN-Habitat's partnership with universities worldwide (UNi), and the Cities and Climate Change Initiative, as well as the Habitat Professionals Forum (HPF). Planning Labs, Urban Lex, the City Resilience Profiling Programme, and the Alliance of Organizations in support of National Urban Policies as well as the Global Alliance for Urban Crises have also been established.

For most of the above networks, governments, civil society, United Nations agencies, professional organizations, academia and research institutions, local governments, grassroots organizations, the private sector, women and youth organizations work together on a given issue, be it land, energy, climate change, youth, women and gender equality, transport, water and sanitation, etc. These networks have various governance structures and partners are members of advisory boards and steering committees.

3. Civil society as partner on advocacy efforts

World Urban Campaign (WUC)

¹ Attendees of the World Urban Forum generally constitute members of national as well as local governments and municipalities, non-governmental organizations and civil society, representatives from academia and research, the private sector, foundations, media, inter-governmental organizations, United Nations and others.

² See footnote 1 above for the stakeholders and constituencies.

The World Urban Campaign (WUC), coordinated by UN-Habitat, is an advocacy and partnership platform to raise awareness about positive urban change and to implement the New Urban Agenda towards the urban dimensions of the SDGs. It is driven by about 200 committed partner organizations from 15 different stakeholder groups, including civil society, from around the world. WUC Partners campaign together on issue-based causes towards the New Urban Agenda. They are also forging alliances to implement action-driven agendas through 'Urban Thinkers Campuses' and build capacity through 'Urban Thinkers Academies' that bring together various partners from different constituencies, including civil society.

The WUC is part of UN-Habitat's work programme. It is governed by a steering committee, composed of UN-Habitat partner organizations, and acts as an advisory body to UN-Habitat's Executive Director. Its Secretariat is coordinated by UN-Habitat.

4. Civil society advisory role in UN-Habitat's work

UN-Habitat currently works with two Advisory Boards that include civil society: the Youth Advisory Board (YAB) and the Advisory Group on Gender Issues (AGGI). Their objectives are to guide the Executive Director on all issues related to youth and gender respectively in the agency's work.

a) Youth Advisory Board (YAB)

The UN-Habitat Youth Advisory Board (YAB) was established in 2008 and launched in 2009³. It is a two-year term board comprising of 16 young people (18-32 years) who project the views of the urban youth for integration into the UN-Habitat urban strategy and work programme. The 16 board advisors comprise of 12 elected members from the six continents and 4 nominated representatives on special issues of housing, post conflict, Future Saudi Cities Programme and youth with disabilities.

Their role is to represent the young people in local, national and international forums; advise the organization on how to engage urban youth in sustainable urbanization and development; and strengthen youth participation and advocacy in youth-led initiatives.

b) Advisory Group on Gender Issues (AGGI)

The Advisory Group on Gender Issues (AGGI) is an independent body that was formed in 2012, following the Sixth session of the World Urban Forum in Naples, on the initiative from Huairou Commission, UN-Habitat and Norway with strong support from Ghana, Tanzania, and Zambia.⁴ AGGI's main task is to advise UN-Habitat's Executive Director on issues related to gender matters, empowering woman's statute and rights which can be accomplished by provision of strategies, guidance, and advice on policies, programs and budgeting at global, regional, and local levels. The objective of AGGI is to advance women's empowerment and gender equality in sustainable urban development; through the provision of strategic guidance and advice, across policies, programme of work and budgeting at global, regional, national and local levels, taking note of gender evaluations, resolutions and the wider UN context for

³ See: UN-Habitat Governing Council resolution 22/4 of 3 April 2009.

⁴ See: UN-Habitat Governing Council resolution 24/4 of 19 April 2013.

coherent work on women's empowerment and gender equality. AGGI has formed working groups on the key areas of managerial and internal programming and policies, land and climate change, women and post conflict natural resource management, as well as women and urban governance (safer cities, leadership, governance, urban basic services).

It is guided by principles of integrity, transparency, trust and accountability. It is made up of members nominated with a consideration of age, gender, regional balance, professional backgrounds; who were selected through a rigorous and transparent process. It also includes a seat for UN-Women and 2 Member States of the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR).

AGGI plays an important role as a global advocate for women's issues in cities. AGGI members are all highly experienced and professional professionals who are able to engage with a variety of actors. This has proven pivotal, particularly in the development of the New Urban Agenda. AGGI worked closely with other partners to ensure that the New Urban Agenda included a gender-responsive approach and demonstrates the unique challenges that women face in cities.

AGGI was actively involved in developing the [Gender Equality Action Plan](#) of UN-Habitat which serves as a guide to achieve UN-Habitat's policy and plan for gender equality and the empowerment of women in urban and human settlements.

5. Civil society in UN-Habitat's governance

a) Governing Council meetings

Civil society representatives may attend the bi-annual meetings of UN-Habitat's Governing Council as observers following its rules of procedures.⁵ This means that they may attend public meetings as well as other events connected to the Governing Council, such as side events. Civil society representatives, on the invitation of the Governing Council President and with approval of the Governing Council, may also make oral statements during the public meetings, as well as submit written statements for the consideration of the delegations.

Specific dialogue sessions on the special theme during the Governing Council meetings are also scheduled with the aim of increasing the participation and contribution of partners, including civil society representatives. Representatives of partner groups have the opportunity to make substantive presentations, followed by a dialogue / discussion among member states, local authorities and other partners.

In order for representatives to be able to attend the Governing Council, civil society representatives must have been accredited. UN-Habitat is currently reviewing its accreditation policy. At its twenty sixth session the UN-habitat Governing Council decided to reconfirm, upon request, the accreditation to the Governing Council of the stakeholders that were in Habitat III. That would be in addition to the organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council⁶, organizations accredited to

⁵ See Rule 66 of the 2015 Rules of Procedure of the Governing Council, UN-Habitat.

⁶ See Rule 66 of the 2015 Rules of Procedure of the Governing Council, UN-Habitat.

Habitat II and to the Special Session of the General Assembly for an overall review and appraisal of the implementation of the Habitat Agenda, or an organization that has been invited by the Executive Director and accredited on an ad-hoc basis, on a no-objection basis by member states.⁷

a) Habitat III legacy

The preparatory process of the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Development (Habitat III) and the Conference itself was recognized by the General Assembly for the innovative approaches on the involvement of civil society. Two of the platforms through which civil society strongly contributed on the elaboration and engagement with member states on the New Urban Agenda, during the negotiation process were:

- The General Assembly of Partners
- The Civil Society Group of New York

UN-Habitat is following-up with these two platforms on their engagement in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda.

6. Next steps

a) Annual partner survey

UN-Habitat is currently in the process of developing an annual partner survey to ensure that partner's (including civil society) voices are heard and their recommendations, feedback and best practices are shared and implemented across the agency. The survey will be pioneered in 2018.

b) Project-based monitoring and reporting

UN-Habitat works with a variety of civil society partners across its global, regional and national projects. These partners report and feed back to their UN-Habitat colleagues on a regular basis. UN-Habitat is currently working towards improving the information-sharing of such feedback through updated internal communication systems, including the Partner Information Management System, which is expected to launch in 2018.

7. Recommendations on civil society engagement at the United Nations

- Engage civil society organizations on issues such as law and policy development from the inception state as they are key to successful implementation as well as being able to add diverse views;
- Include civil society organizations into the United Nations processes more formally, in particular in the context of implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, as they continue to be marginalized by some national governments and as such, a formal inclusion into United Nations processes could assist their mandates and expertise in the delivery of the global goals;
- Similarly, investigate what prevents certain civil society organizations from being accredited / invited to consultative processes and remedy these barriers to inclusion to ensure that a wide

⁷ See UN-Habitat Governing Council resolution 19/8 of 9 May 2003.

variety of civil society organizations' voices are heard. This could lead to more impactful discussions, with the United Nations as a facilitator, especially in the context of potentially contentious issues;

- Advocate for the protection and promotion of the rights of civil society organizations to enable them to successfully carry out their work;
- Ensure inclusion and participation of youth civil society in forums where decisions are made to enable them to share creative and innovative solutions to not only development-related problems but also challenges within in the United Nations, including in the context of funding;
- Improve online inclusion. While technology has minimized the gap between the public and the United Nations, as evidenced by the over nine million people who participated in the development of the Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations' online presence should be invigorated and more efforts need to be made to include those who do not have access to the internet – approximately 60% of the global population is not yet online, the majority of whom are based in developing countries in the Global South.