



Human Rights 75 Event

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights at 75:

Civic space: Enhancing participation through strengthened partnerships

13 September 2023, 10:00-1:00, Conference Room 2

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

Opening remarks by Ms. Ilze Brands Kehris, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights

In her opening remarks, ASG Ilze Brands Kehris reaffirmed that participation is not only a fundamental right, but that the meaningful, inclusive, and safe participation by civil society, from the global to local level, is a precondition for achieving development, for ensuring peace and security, and for realizing human rights. She highlighted the critical role of civil society in building bridges between governments and the populations they serve, bringing the voice, experience and knowledge of diverse communities to the table. While recalling the commitments made in the Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights and the UN Guidance Note on Protecting and Promoting Civic Space, ASG Brands Kehris noted the challenges that civil society often faces in different UN processes, including with regards to restrictive participation or accreditation procedures, inadequate accessibility of venues, unequal treatment of specific groups, or even intimidation and reprisals. In this context, she highlighted positive practices that have been developed by the Human Rights Council, noting that online and hybrid modalities have allowed for increased civil society engagement and enhanced diversity of civil society actors participating in sessions. Mainstreaming such practices in other UN processes and finding creating ways of using digital tools is crucial to develop a coherent UN system-wide approach that facilitates open, genuine, effective, and meaningful consultations, offline and online, with diverse civil society actors. Emphasizing that the safety and security of civil society must be a key priority, ASG Brands Kehris reiterated the need for concerted efforts to prevent and respond to intimidation and reprisals.

Panel discussion

H.E. Ms. Maritza Chan Valverde (Permanent Representative of Costa Rica; “Unmute Civil Society” Initiative) underscored the importance of the UNmute civil society initiative (launched by Costa Rica in cooperation with Denmark and civil society actors) as a starting point for enhanced civil society participation in the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Vienna Declaration and the 2030 Agenda. She also highlighted the role of civil society organizations in advocating for the establishment of a High Commissioner for Human Rights and the landmark resolution recognizing the universal human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. In this context, Ms. Valverde underlined that civil society's involvement in policy and decision-making processes is crucial as Member States alone cannot

tackle the existing global challenges. To this end, Costa Rica supports the review of current working methods with a view to creating an enabling environment for the meaningful participation of diverse groups and stakeholders (including the scientific community, NHRIs, indigenous peoples, and the private sector) and harnessing their expertise for the promotion of human rights, peace and security, and sustainable development. Practical steps that can be taken in this regard include the convening of townhall meetings with civil society and improving the accessibility of informal consultations, both online and offline.

Ms. Elizabeth Spehar (Assistant Secretary-General, Peacebuilding Support Office) recalled that peacebuilding and sustaining peace requires direct and meaningful community engagement that enables participation and ownership of local beneficiaries and partners. She highlighted that communities and local civil society are distinct rights holders who play a critical role in identifying local conflict drivers, enhancing early-warning, and promoting context-specific solutions. In this context, ASG Spehar noted that the UN Community Engagement Guidelines on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace reflect a strong system-wide commitment to inclusive and localized peacebuilding, providing a useful tool for UN field presences in developing country specific community engagement strategies. Designated UN civil society focal points, Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams can also play an important role in this regard. However, despite these exiting tools, ASG Spehar emphasized that further measures are needed to enable a more diverse group of local civil society and communities to have a stake in peacebuilding efforts. In this context, she highlighted steps taken by the Peacebuilding Support Office to advance community and civil society engagement, including through initiatives of the Peacebuilding Fund, the work of the Peacebuilding Commission, and the planned Annual Dialogue on peacebuilding between the UN and global civil society actors.

H.E. Mr. Alexander Marschik (Chair of the 78th Session of the General Assembly Third Committee; Permanent Representative of Austria) underlined that civil society and human rights defenders are an engine of progress and a catalyst for change, working tirelessly to champion the rights of all individuals. Citing the active engagement of persons with disabilities and the organizations representing them in developing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Mr. Marschik underlined that civil society voices and experiences are essential in shaping policies and driving meaningful change, including at the UN. In this context, he also noted that civil society's calls to address the continuing crackdown on those speaking out against human rights abuses was instrumental in the creation of the reprisals mandate entrusted to the ASG for human rights. Mr. Marschik emphasized the importance of multi-stakeholder participation in the Third Committee, noting that civil society participation increases the credibility of the UN system's policy responses as well as the effectiveness of decisions taken by Member States. He expressed commitment to build on good practices established by previous Third Committee Chairs, including the convening of informal briefings with civil society stakeholders at the start and end of the session. He also encouraged Member States to involve youth delegates as members of their delegations and to take into account civil society inputs when negotiating resolutions.

Ms. Mavic Cabrera Balleza (Chief Executive Officer and Founder, Global Network of Women Peacebuilders) emphasized that civil society participation is an essential component of a strong multilateral system that can effectively respond to complex and fast-evolving conflicts and crises. Particularly local women and youth peacebuilders play a crucial role as peacebuilding agents- building confidence and trust, encouraging cooperation and collective action, promoting social cohesion, and driving action on women's rights and gender equality. While noting that the role of civil society is often acknowledged in discussions on women, peace and security, Ms. Cabrera Balleza expressed concern that this recognition often amounts to little more than lip service. In this context, she referred to the increase in threats, attacks, and restrictions on civil society organizations as documented by OHCHR, including online threats against women peacebuilders and registration requirements that prevent civil society organizations from operating. Turning to good practices of partnerships between the UN and civil society, Ms. Cabrera Balleza highlighted the

Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action Compact; the UN Community Engagement Guidelines on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace; and the proposed Annual Dialogue between civil society, the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and the Peacebuilding Support Office. In closing, Ms. Cabrera Balleza called for the promotion of innovative practices that localize the women, peace and security and youth peace and security agendas in a way that leaves no one behind.

Mr. Binota Moy Dhamai (member of the “Global Coalition of Civil Society, Indigenous Peoples, Social Movements, and Local Communities for the Universal Recognition of the Human Right to a Clean, Healthy, and Sustainable Environment” and member of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples) recalled that, while participation can mean different things to actors, it comes with specific rights and obligations and should strive to create a UN that genuinely reflects the full political, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity of our world. He highlighted the role of civil society and Indigenous Peoples in the democratic transformation of the UN, noting that Indigenous Peoples have built important partnerships with the UN and non-Indigenous civil society platforms to collectively address common challenges, including in advocating for the recognition of the right to a health environment. While noting that the UN plays a significant role in creating civic space, Mr. Dhamai stressed that the domestic political context is also relevant as gaps persists between commitments made by States in international fora and implementation on the domestic level. In this context, he expressed concern that Indigenous Peoples are disproportionately affected by the increase in repression, impunity, human rights violations and the unprecedented crackdown on the judiciary, independent media, and civil society. Mr. Dhamai also noted that the SDG process has not been inclusive and has ignored the Indigenous Peoples’ aspirations in development interventions. He underscored that their active and meaningful participation in decision-making processes at all levels is crucial in promoting social justice, overcoming historical inequality, promoting human rights, and finding sustainable solutions for political, social and environmental challenges.

Mr. Mandeep Tiwana (Chief Officer, CIVICUS) identified the restriction of civic space as the greatest barrier for civil society participation, noting that 85% of the world’s population are living in countries with challenging civic space conditions according to the CIVICUS Monitor. He expressed concern that, despite the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, activists and organizations face various types of persecution when speaking truth to power, uncovering corruption and serious human rights abuses, or advocating for transformative economic, political and social change. In this connection, Mr. Tiwana underscored the importance of the recommendations of the UNmute civil society initiative while stressing that they are closely linked to the Secretary-General’s Call to Action for Human Rights. In addition to the implementation of these recommendations, Mr. Tiwan called on the UN to carry out an audit on the implementation of the Call to Action and the UN Guidance on Civic Space with the view to identifying actionable recommendations for urgent actions that go beyond measures taken in the context of various anniversaries.

[Open discussion](#)