
NGO Access to and at the United Nations in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Statement of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CoNGO)

30 November 2020

“The UN depends on the active engagement of civil society actors. They are critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and addressing climate change. We must actively counter narratives that seek to discredit and undermine civil society. Where parts of civil society are considered a threat, we need a principled mindset and to engage constructively. Where civil society actors form an indispensable part of the landscape of collective action, we must design and implement our programmes with broad participation in mind.” (António Guterres, UN Secretary-General, on the role of the UN in protecting and promoting civic space, in [The Highest Aspiration: A Call to Action for Human Rights](#), 24 February 2020)

1. Facilitating and enhancing the participation of NGOs in the United Nations System is central to the mission of [CoNGO](#)—the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations. Working to ensure that NGOs have adequate and regular access to UN meetings, conferences, special events and documentation has been a prime CoNGO function throughout its 72 years of existence. NGO access to and at the UN is a major channel through which NGOs assert their voice and exercise their agency throughout the UN System, contributing their expertise, commitment, energy, and substantive input to policy-making processes. CoNGO has constantly striven to ensure and defend the free exchange of ideas among all parties at the United Nations, including in relation to UN Summits and Conventions.
2. On November 18, 2020, CoNGO convened a virtual Consultation on “NGO Access to and at the UN in a Time of COVID-19 Pandemic”. The Consultation, moderated by the President of CoNGO, brought together over seventy participants from around the world, mostly from CoNGO member organizations. Lead speakers providing their expertise were officers of CoNGO Substantive Committees in New York, Geneva, and Vienna.
3. This was indeed the second CoNGO consultation on NGO-UN relationships held this year within the framework of the UN’s seventy-fifth anniversary. On March 5, 2020, a CoNGO UN75 Dialogue was addressed by both the Chair of the ECOSOC Committee on NGOs and the Acting Chief of the NGO Branch of UN DESA. Among many noteworthy remarks they made were: “The ECOSOC Committee on NGOs and CoNGO share a common goal—that of facilitating the contribution and participation of NGOs in the work of the United Nations.”; “NGOs are faced with the challenge of making their contribution to the UN effective and mutually beneficial in a context marked by an increased number of stakeholders. This situation calls for increased coordination among NGOs in order to have their voice better heard.”; and “NGOs are a major actor in the monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals and in working with governments to promote action and innovation.”

4. The following were highlights of the CoNGO Consultation on November 18, 2020:

a. NGO advocacy and partnerships are essential to the effective functioning of the UN System. Some UN agencies and entities simply could not fulfill their roles without such partnerships with both operational and advocacy NGOs. NGOs have a crucial role in promoting the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. It is well established that effective and responsible NGO input to the decision-making processes of UN agencies and organs enhances meaningful and implementable governmental output.

b. The existing UN rules and agreements on NGO access and participation need to be fully observed by all UN departments and officials, as well as by government delegations. [ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31](#) is not optional; it is the central Consultative Status rulebook, even as it is much beyond that throughout the UN System. The Resolution, anchored on [Article 71 of the UN Charter](#), provides for rights of NGOs with consultative status to participate in meetings of ECOSOC and those of other UN bodies, and the ability to consult with UN Secretariat. It is unacceptable and contrary to the letter and spirit of the [UN Headquarters agreement](#) and that of other agreements for countries hosting UN centres and meetings to hinder the application of Resolution 1996/31, for example, through denial of visas. It would be most welcome, in a time of pandemic, for UN Secretariat and UN entities to provide NGO partners a timely response system to their queries or offer of support and expertise.

c. The current coronavirus disease pandemic restrictions are a serious, though unavoidable, handicap to regular NGO contacts with UN officials and government delegates. The recent lessons learned concerning obstacles in communication, as well as the enhanced use of technology to communicate at a distance, must be applied in the future, when the pandemic is over. Current pandemic restrictions are not however an excuse for countermanding standing rules, nor for creating new impediments to UN access. The Consultation heard many examples of such impediments, and CoNGO will monitor such situations and intervene with officials when and where it is deemed appropriate. The fact that some restrictions are attributed to the UN's financial problems is another reason for NGOs to advocate with national governments for more consistent and timely resourcing of the UN System.

d. NGO participation throughout the UN System is a contribution to democracy with and at the UN. As former UN Secretary-General [Kofi Annan](#) stated: "The truth is that NGOs are working with us everywhere: alongside us whenever crisis strikes; right behind us in advocating for women's rights, international criminal justice and action on global warming; and, often far out in front of us in identifying new threats and concerns. This is certainly one of your most important roles. You can often see what is not yet visible to diplomats, and think what still seems unthinkable to governments and their officials might not yet be able to admit. What you say may be unpalatable today, but often becomes the conventional wisdom of tomorrow..."

e. It is unacceptable when governments endeavour to roll back NGO and civil society participation rights and opportunities. Governments must be aware that they have an ongoing duty to protect civil society rights, which are citizens' rights. CoNGO will continue to play a role in sharing information on roll-back practices and ongoing attempts to shrink civil society space.

f. The Consultation heard examples of inconsistencies regarding procedures for [NGO accreditation and access](#) at the three main UN Centres, and indeed throughout the entities of the UN System, including at Regional Commissions, World Conferences, and Conferences of Parties to Conventions. There are differences from one UN organ to another in admitting NGOs and permitting them to effectively participate in their sessions. CoNGO's extensive experience and data will be mobilized to advocate for the elimination of these differences and inconsistencies, applying best practices with necessary adaptation to local requirements and

contexts.

g. The [UN General Assembly Special Session on COVID-19](#) (December 3-4, 2020) is an opportunity for civil society to address many of the concerns outlined in this present Statement. Despite the very short timeframe, CoNGO is pursuing these concerns. It will be vital that this UNGA Special Session on COVID-19—and indeed all UN entities in their deliberations—take full account of the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report, entitled "[The Future is Now: Science for Achieving Sustainable Development](#)". Issued well before the coronavirus pandemic struck, the Report is prescient in recalling to governments that "Science has a particularly vital role to play...and that strong political will and commitment will be required to make the needed transformations." The Report advocates for universal access to, inter alia, water and sanitation infrastructure, with special attention given to persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. The Report calls for "strengthening the science-policy-society interface, providing society and policy-makers information they can use to solve problems." CoNGO associates itself fully with all the above considerations, and supports their incorporation in governmental decision-making.

h. The COVID-19 situation is unpredictable. There is a real need for better sharing of information on UN COVID-19 regulations, restrictions and requirements, and more broadly on the full field of NGO accreditation, access and participation. CoNGO's website (www.ngocongo.org) has been redesigned and updated to provide a one-stop resource on UN-NGO relationships. Over time, the website will aid in documenting the contributions of NGOs over decades to the development of the UN and its many agencies and programmes.

- 5.** CoNGO issues this Statement to foster awareness and action in relation to the issues raised in the Consultation of November 18, 2020, and to illustrate its determination to reinforce its long-term engagement in promoting and enhancing [NGO access](#) to and participation in the United Nations System. The United Nations has an essential—indeed, an irreplaceable—role in confronting global challenges and threats. CoNGO stands ready to cooperate at a difficult time for all parties, and invites support from all NGO and civil society constituencies.

For more information:

Liberato C. Bautista, CoNGO President
president@ngocongo.org