

Consultations of the Committee on NGOs with NGOs in consultative status

22 June 2018

Summary of views and responses received from NGOs

Overview

The Committee on NGOs invited all NGOs in consultative status with ECOSOC to submit written contributions in response to four questions raised for discussion during the consultations of the Committee on NGOs with NGOs in consultative status on 22 June 2018. The Committee received a total 195 written submissions by NGOs: 18 from Latin America and the Caribbean, 37 from Africa, 56 from Asia-Pacific, 8 from Eastern Europe and 76 from Western Europe and Other States.

The main points and views expressed by NGOs have been summarized below. This does not pretend to be an exhaustive or comprehensive recollection of all views expressed, but mainly an overview of the main points raised in response to the four questions posed.

Question 1: How can NGOs further contribute to the work of ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies? What are the most efficient modalities for NGOs to contribute to the United Nations policy-making, be recognized and be influential in these processes?

NGOs' contribution to the work of the United Nations

NGOs reiterated the critical role they can play in the implementation of major UN agreements, including the 2030 Agenda, as partners of the United Nations system and Member States. Generally, they seek greater collaboration with the UN and governments so that their expertise and capacities can be used to their full extent with the objective of achieving the 2030 Agenda and more broadly the UN goals.

NGOs underlined the various ways in which they contribute to the work of ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies. The main contributions indicated were as follows:

- NGOs reflect voices from different stakeholders that would not be heard otherwise. They serve as a direct link to far-reaching communities and provide first-hand information on activities and rural and secluded areas that governmental agencies don't always have access to.
- NGOs are a pool of expertise that can provide data, analysis and best practices from the ground.
- From their direct experience and knowledge, NGOs can provide valuable inputs in decision-making processes.
- NGOs can contribute to the dissemination of and education on the work of ECOSOC through education and advocacy campaigns.
- NGOs contribute to advancing UN goals by implementing major agreements and acting as partners in advancing ECOSOC's agenda. They can conduct needs assessments and impact assessments on the ground and can conduct evaluation and monitoring for programs undertaken by UN actors.

Including NGOs in the decision-making processes

NGOs are encouraged that voices from civil society are increasingly being heard at the United Nations. However, their impact on policy and decision-making is still seen as being limited. A common frustration among NGOs is that NGOs participation rights are limited by the Rules of Procedures of ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies. These rules and practice may differ in the various bodies. NGOs feel therefore that they are limited from meaningful engagement in many intergovernmental meetings, with their participation being relegated to side events or to making short statements at the end of meetings, when Member States are no longer present in the room. The following suggestions were put forward to increase the participation of civil society in decision-making processes at the UN:

- What is needed is a real dialogue between NGOs and Member States. In that regard, the dialogue sessions that have been set up over the years in various bodies were said to be useful. Also, NGOs requested the possibility of a greater interaction with Member States during meetings. They suggested that conference rooms be widely open to NGOs during meetings to facilitate that interaction.
- NGOs could be included in the decision-making processes, the negotiation of resolutions, and the drafting of normative documents. Some NGOs suggested that NGOs with a specific expertise could be included in Member States' delegations during intergovernmental negotiations.
- NGOs welcomed the numerous calls for written contributions from ECOSOC and suggested that more written reports and contributions be requested from NGOs. However, in order for these inputs to be impactful, NGOs suggested that they be included in the summary reports of the meetings. Some suggested that NGOs could be divided into sub-categories according to their area of work and be requested to provide expertise on specific matters.
- NGOs could be requested to play more of a leadership role, in that some well-known experienced civil society members could be asked to take part in panels and discussions and be consulted on specific issues. NGOs could also be involved in setting meetings and event agendas, or submitting ideas for conferences.
- Allowing additional space and time for meetings, round tables and side events during UN events was also proposed. It was further suggested that NGOs should not be limited in their speaking time during the Human Rights Council (HRC) and that restrictions on the number of accreditations allowed for the sessions of the HRC be lifted.

Increasing and streamlining the engagement of the UN system with NGOs

NGOs expressed the desire for greater collaboration with the UN at the Headquarters, regional and local levels. At the Headquarters, NGOs proposed to establish a formal contact or collaboration with UN bodies, which would facilitate mutual exchanges and greater input into policy-making.

Beyond the Headquarters, it was suggested that civil society outreach be strengthened and streamlined throughout the UN system. Civil society expressed a desire for greater regional and local collaboration with the UN. Many CSOs see outreach based within their geographic and local area as far more effective and meaningful. They seek to work more closely with UN Country teams and agencies. They recommended that the UN local offices recognize and engage NGOs with consultative status with ECOSOC, so that these can create synergies amongst themselves and support further the implementation of the major UN goals. Similarly, the formation of intensive, informative and learning regional networks of NGOs

with ECOSOC status were seen as a way to foster greater collaboration between NGOs working in similar fields at the regional level and strengthen the United Nations.

Question 2: What in your organization's view should be done to provide better support to NGOs during the process of obtaining consultative status with ECOSOC?

Application process

Many NGOs were satisfied with the existing application process. Some suggested that the application process could be simplified, in particular with regards to the questionnaire and the justification documents required that can be challenging to obtain in some remote areas in developing countries. Some NGOs mentioned that the time required to go through the whole process of acquiring consultative status could act as a deterrent to some NGOs and should be shortened.

The current application process and its requirements constitute a challenge for NGOs with limited access to the internet or translation services. In that regard, the following suggestions were made:

- NGOs should be provided with an alternative way to submit their application form (via email or paper);
- NGOs should be provided with support to translate the justification documents required or be allowed to submit their application in all UN official languages;
- NGOs should be provided with a space at a local UN office where they could have access to a reliable internet connection to fill out and submit their application.
- The local or regional United Nations offices could act as relays of information on the process for applying for consultation status and offer capacity building to NGOs in that regard. A regional UN representative could be available online and by phone to assist applicants with any questions that they may have.

NGO capacity building

A large number of NGOs suggested that the NGO Committee offer a greater level of support throughout the application process. Regular webinars or online videos could provide applicants with information on a) the United Nations and ECOSOC, the main goals and objectives of the Council, and the benefits of acquiring consultative status; and b) the steps, expectations and modalities to obtain consultative status. Webinars available in all official languages would allow for more NGOs in developing countries to apply. Regular online and face-to-face Q&A sessions or having a designated point of contact within ECOSOC to assist NGOs throughout the process were also suggested by NGOs.

Connecting applicant NGOs with NGOs that have already acquired status was seen as an effective way to support new applicants, as they could respond to questions and manage their expectations. This could be done by pairing applicant NGOs with NGOs that already hold status or by creating an online platform where NGOs in status can guide applicant NGOs throughout the application process. These interactions could also be done at the country level, facilitated by the UN local offices.

Providing information by means of a welcome package or orientation sessions after acquiring consultative status were seen as useful ways to offer information to NGOs on how best to make use of their consultative status.

The review process by the Committee on NGOs

NGOs expressed concern as to the modalities around current accreditation processes that lack transparency, objectivity and efficiency. According to some, actions by the Committee have not only delayed applications, but have also amounted to reprisals against NGOs seeking to cooperate with the UN. They believe that the NGO Committee should have safeguards to prevent against inconsistent or arbitrary delay or denial of accreditation.

NGOs mentioned that clear guidelines, explaining the grounds on which applications are assessed are required. Members of the Committee were said to use procedural tactics such as repetitive questioning to delay applications, disproportionately affecting NGOs that work on specific human rights concerns such as those of LGBTQI individuals. Suggestions were also made to limit the number of sessions during which applications could be reviewed, after which decisions on whether to grant accreditation or not should be taken by ECOSOC.

The timeframe within which the answers of NGOs are considered by the Committee was seen as problematic as it delays the accreditation further. NGO representatives suggested that applicants be able to participate in the daily Q&A session via videoconferencing. Member States of the NGO Committee should ensure that NGOs always have the opportunity to respond to any objection to obtaining their consultative status, as required by resolution 1996/31, paragraph 15, and to respond to any intention to suspend or withdraw status under part VII of the resolution, as required by paragraph 56. NGOs should also have the option to respond to questions immediately, including via video conferencing facilities.

NGOs also suggested that ECOSOC should consider establishing term limits for membership or increase the number of Member States on the Committee.

Question 3: How can the participation of NGOs from developing countries and countries with economies in transition in UN's work be increased?

Decentralized CSO Outreach strategies

Although the proportion of NGOs that hold consultative status from developed and developing countries and countries with economies in transition is more balanced today, NGOs from developed countries are still much more represented than NGOs from developing countries and countries with economies in transition. To remedy to this imbalance, NGOs suggested that NGOs from developing countries and countries with economies in transition should be made aware of the consultative status and its benefits, as they are often not informed about it, especially in the rural, remote areas. The information should be publicized widely and decentralized, including through the press and local events organized by UN representatives or through relevant embassies. Informational webinars could be targeted towards NGOs in remote areas or populations that are the least represented at ECOSOC. NGOs that have obtained consultative status could also help to conduct outreach/mentorship activities in their region or country.

Lack of financial resources

The concern most mentioned by NGOs was the lack of funds that prevented NGOs from developing countries and countries with economies in transition to attend meetings in person, which puts them at a disadvantage. A few suggestions to address this problem include:

- Increasing access to grants or funding for obtaining visas and covering the travel and lodging costs to NGO representatives that have limited financial resources;
- The creation of a fund within ECOSOC backed by foundations, Member States, large NGOs and the private sector to financially support organizations that have limited funds. It could select organizations based on certain criteria to participate in UN meetings;
- Waiving fees to hold events at the UN for NGOs from low income countries;
- Identifying and informing NGOs of outside networks – businesses, foundations, and other organizations that offer grants to NGOs for participating in meetings;
- Establishing a dedicated lodging in New York, Geneva and Vienna for NGO representatives;
- Enhancing remote participation in meetings through webcasts, video conferences, online meeting rooms and submitting written inputs.

Enhancing their access to meetings

Many NGOs were concerned by the difficulty to obtain visas - including delays, costs and denials, that prevent the participation of civil society representatives to ECOSOC and ECOSOC subsidiary bodies' meetings. They considered that ECOSOC should take up instances of visa denials for civil society representatives with relevant State authorities. Some representatives also suggested that ECOSOC could send copies of the official letters of invitation to the relevant embassies to facilitate the process of obtaining visas.

Although regional consultations provide additional avenues for CSOs to participate in the lead up to major UN events, NGOs believed that the UN should endeavor to hold more major meetings, including the Commission on the Status of Women and other Commissions, in locations outside of North America and Europe.

NGOs also proposed that ECOSOC should ensure that alliance and networks of CSOs, with strong constituencies in the South are prioritized for cooperation with the UN, since these organizations can provide avenues for smaller grassroots NGOs to participate.

Question 4: Once the consultative status is granted to organizations, how best can NGOs access the opportunities given to them to take part in UN processes?

Dissemination of information

NGOs requested that in person and online training modules be organized for NGOs that recently acquired consultative status, providing information on the United Nations system and the various processes and meetings that they can take part in. Some training modules could be specifically targeted to certain NGOs working in a certain field, for example trainings on the HRC could be provided to organizations focused on human rights. A NGO suggested that all NGOs in status take the various courses offered by UNITAR to familiarize themselves with the UN system. Orientation sessions could even be organized by NGOs that have been working with the United Nations over a long period of time and can share their experience and expertise.

NGOs requested that they be sent more information about upcoming UN meetings and conferences, with sufficient time to plan to attend meetings and obtain visas. With that in mind, the UN could build a single

centralized agenda of all the UN meetings and conferences that NGOs can attend. This could be updated and sent to all NGOs in consultative status every year. Monthly newsletters with information about upcoming meetings, as well as decisions and reports that were adopted should also be sent. It was recommended that there be a single, centralized webpage where all the meetings and events of ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies could be listed.

Several NGOs proposed that a yearly conference or townhall be held for all NGOs in status, during which NGOs could learn about the priorities of ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies and the meetings taking place. NGOs also welcomed the possibility of sharing information on their best practices, case studies and experience. A yearly conference was seen as an opportunity for some to submit their contributions to the work of the United Nations and ECOSOC.

Creating greater networking opportunities

NGOs asked for more networking opportunities amongst themselves, including through a yearly conference or an online platform where NGOs could be grouped according to their industry and field of work. An online platform would not only facilitate networking and collaboration, but also provide a forum for the sharing of best practices and information. Asking NGOs that have extensive experience working at the UN to take recently accredited NGOs under their wing so that they can become familiar with the UN system and how to build relationships with Member States was also suggested.

Some NGOs also suggested that there be a specific room at the UN Headquarters allocated for NGOs to meet and collaborate amongst each other.