TOGETHER FIRST

A global system that works for all

Yes	Nicholson	Yes
[illegible]	[illegible]	Short

Global catastrophic risks mitigated	Risk multipliers managed	Implementation timeframe

DETAILS

The UN system needs a high-level point for Civil Society

Despite the challenges, the UN's agenda for civil society engagement is alive and well despite its increasing reliance on CSOs across the UN's broad spectrum of work – from service provision to contributing to major policy initiatives like the SDGs. Current provisions for civil society participation across the UN system are piecemeal, and where inclusion is permitted, participation favours well-resourced international CSOs with the ability (and visas) to staff an office in NY. Furthermore, because a committee of member states acts as gatekeeper for much coveted ECOSOC consultative status, decisions to approve CSOs are skewed by member state politics, resulting in those working on issues like human rights, reproductive rights and migrants being treated unfavourably.

The UN system needs a high-level focal point for civil society with the funding and institutional status necessary to champion and drive through reforms to deliver simpler access and broader participation for civil society organisations to contribute across the UN system.

Rank-wise, ASG or above would be appropriate, however, the most important thing is that the office be located within the Executive Office of the Secretary-General and that the Secretary-General commit to it and, together with the chief-of-staff, be open to regular updates and occasional briefings and appearances at key civil society events.

State support should be forthcoming. Fundamentally, the UN in its current state is is a voluntary organisation of nation states, but those states must surely know that they can do more and do better with the dedicated commitment of thousands of NGOs and the expertise and on-the-ground activity they contribute.

THE PRECEDENT OF ASG FOR EXTERNAL RELATIONS

The precedent of Kofi Annan's Assistant Secretary-General for External Relations – a position that existed until 2003 – could contain useful lessons for a future USG for civil society. The position incorporated outreach to parliamentarians, the academic world, religious leaders as well as charities and other groups committed to peace, justice, development and human rights.

The office need not be large. The ASG for External Relations, widely regarded as a highly effective office, had around six full time staffers. Importantly though this office had access to many other departments and, crucially, to the press office and press spokesperson.

The new role should act as an active intermediary between civil society and the Secretary-General. Effectiveness will be contingent on the Secretary-General's full support and respect for the critical role of civil society and the UN.

MORE INFO

With an appropriate budget and rank, a focal point for civil society can:

- facilitate the participation of a much broader set of individuals to participate in UN processes, including proactive outreach to ensure the inclusion of those working in underrepresented fields and regions
- champion reforms both within the UN system and to member states to comprehensively open the UN up to civil society
- improving perceptions of the UN within civil society will improve faith in the institutions of the UN, hopefully triggering a similar effect in the public
- re-balance the current skew towards the UN's external partners being from the corporate sector as opposed to the

not-for-profit sector (the UN's current emphasis on multi-stakeholder partnerships tend to be driven by the funding [illegible] global governance [illegible]

- enable the participation of new actors which will improve the substance and evidence-base for decisions taken by the UN. This will assist the UN's mission across the board [illegible] may be vital in raising the issue up the Secretary-General's agenda.

[illegible]

RELEVANT LINKS

- https://www.una.org.uk/strengthening-civil-society-engagement-united-nations

- https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3037-market-discourse-has-captured-the-development-agenda-to-a-point-that-may-be-incompatible-with-un-mandates

A useful way to make progress on this reform could be via the political declaration, to be adopted as part of the UN's 75th anniversary process. In part, the declaration will focus on "the UN we need". Recognition within this declaration of the need for the UN to become more inclusive and better at close cooperation with external partners, including civil society, could provide useful political momentum behind the idea.