Civil Society

Civil society. Refers to the associations of citizens (outside their families, friends and businesses) entered into voluntarily to advance their interests, ideas and ideologies. The term does not include profit-making activity (the private sector) or governing (the public sector). Of particular relevance to the United Nations are mass organizations (such as organizations of peasants, women or retired people), trade unions, professional associations, social movements, indigenous people’s organizations, religious and spiritual organizations, academe and public benefit non-governmental organizations.

A/58/817 (11 June 2004): We the peoples: civil society, the United Nations and global governance; Report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations (Glossary, page 13)

UN Entities

- UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)
  - Social Development Issues - Civil Society: https://social.desa.un.org/issues/civil-society
  - Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations: http://csonet.org/index.php?menu=80
- UN Department of Global Communications (DGC)
  - Civil Society Unit: https://www.un.org/en/civilsociety
  - List of CSOs Associated with the Department of Global Communications: https://www.un.org/en/civil-society/list-csos-associated-department-global-communications
- UN Democracy Fund: http://www.un.org/democracyfund/
- Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) – Civil Society: https://www.ohchr.org/en/resources/civil-society
- International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) - Partnerships: https://www.iaea.org/about/partnerships
- International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) - Partnering with civil society: https://www.ifad.org/en/ngo
- International Monetary Fund - Civil Society and the IMF: https://www.imf.org/en/About/Partners/civil-society
- International Maritime Organization (IMO) - Non-Governmental international Organizations which have been granted consultative status with IMO: https://www.imo.org/en/About/Membership/Pages/NGOsInConsultativeStatus.aspx
- International Organization for Migration (IOM) - Civil Society: https://www.iom.int/civil-society
- International Telecommunication Union (ITU) - Working Together - Civil Society: https://www.itu.int/en/cop/Pages/civil-society.aspx
- UN Women – UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women – Civil Society: http://www.unwomen.org/en/partnerships/civil-society
UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) – Our Partners – NGOs & CBOs: https://unhabitat.org/our-partners/

UN Conference on Trade and Development – UNCTAD and Civil Society: https://unctad.org/civil-society

UN Development Programme – UNDP and civil society: https://www.undp.org/partners/civil-society-organizations

UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) - Civil Society and Community Based Organisations: https://www.undrr.org/implementing-sendai-framework/partners-and-stakeholders/civil-society

UN Environment Programme (UNEP) – Civil society engagement: https://www.unep.org/civil-society-engagement

UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) – NGOs and Foundations: https://en.unesco.org/partnerships/non-governmental-organizations


Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) - Non-Governmental Organizations: https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/our-partners/non-governmental-organizations

UN Children’s Fund – UNICEF civil society partnerships: https://www.unicef.org/partnerships/civil-society

United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) - Relations with Intergovernmental Organizations (IGO) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO): https://www.unido.org/igo-ngo

UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) - UNODC Engagement with Civil Society on Drugs and Crime: https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/ngos/cst.html


World Food Programme - Partnering with WFP – for NGOs: https://www.wfp.org/partnering-with-wfp-for-ngos

World Health Organization (WHO) - Civil society and NGO engagement: https://www.who.int/about/collaboration/civil-society-and-ngo-engagement

World Trade Organization (WTO) - Relations with Non-Governmental Organizations/Civil Society: https://www.wto.org/english/forums_e/ngo_e/intro_e.htm

World Bank and Civil Society: https://www.worldbank.org/en/about/partners/civil-society

Selected UN documents

A/HRC/53/38/Add.4 (23 June 2023): General principles and guidelines on ensuring the right of civil society organizations to have access to resources: report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association, Clément Nyaletsossi Voule: https://undocs.org/A/HRC/53/38/Add.4


A/75/893 (2 June 2021): Letter dated 21 May 2021 from the Permanent Representatives of Costa Rica and Denmark to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General: https://undocs.org/A/75/893

Contains: Recommendations for ensuring meaningful civil society participation at the United Nations: from ambition to action.
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- Further UN documents on the topic “Civil Society” – click here

Selected Publications available online

  Civil Society and Disarmament : 2022 is a compilation of stories reveals the hope for a better future shared by members of the largest generation in history, and it show. The stories exemplify #Youth4Disarmament’s work to increase youth participation, amplify the perspectives of young people and build constructive partnerships together.
  - If I disappear: global report on protecting young people in civic space (UN Envoy on Youth, November 2021): https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4014684
    This is a research report, commissioned by the United Nations Office of the Secretary General’s Envoy on Youth, with the financial support of the Government of Norway. The paper is a joint civil society, youth-led and United Nations initiative, with the support of the Protection Working Group of the Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security.
  - OHCHR Publications: https://www.ohchr.org/en/resources/civil-society