



Norwegian Ministry  
of Foreign Affairs



Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
of the Czech Republic



## CIVIC SPACE COHORT

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# Civic Space at the UN

**COUNTRY LEAD: THE UNITED KINGDOM**

**SUPPORTED BY: ARMENIA, CANADA, THE CZECH REPUBLIC, ESTONIA, KOSOVO, DENMARK, LATVIA, MALTA, THE NETHERLANDS, NORWAY, SLOVAKIA, SPAIN, SWEDEN, AND THE UNITED STATES**

Civil society’s ability to provide expertise, represent marginalised groups and ensure accountability improves the operation and outcomes of the UN system. Sadly, that role is not recognised by all and civic space within the UN system is contested. Civil society organisations (CSOs) and human rights defenders (HRDs) too often face intimidation and reprisals for engagement and cooperation with the UN, its representatives and mechanisms, while some states seek to introduce new concepts in international norms in order to undermine their efficacy in dealing with issues of civic freedom. For too long, processes designed to ensure openness have been politicised in ways which actually serve to restrict participation. The rise in reprisals undermines the UN’s championing of the multistakeholder approach, resulting in the failure to give a platform to traditionally marginalised groups including women and girls.

In September 2020, under the leadership of the Secretary-General, the United Nations adopted a Guidance Note on Protecting and Promoting Civic Space.<sup>1</sup> The Guidance Note recognizes civic space as a threshold issue to successful implementation of all three pillars of the United Nations and, building on the Secretary-General’s Call to Action for Human Rights, committed to take concrete steps in protecting and promoting civic space at the country, but also the global level.

Numerous reports and guidance documents have been produced aiming to advance inclusion in UN processes and prevent reprisals<sup>2</sup> against those who participate in them. Eighty countries signed a statement to the Third Committee of the General Assembly in 2022 calling on “all States to take proactive steps to address reprisals” and the UN “to continue its efforts to improve data collection, analysis and documentation of cases, and to use this information to actively improve policies and practices so that the gaps

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<sup>1</sup> [United Nations \(2020\) United Nations Guidance Note: Protection and Promotion of Civic Space](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Human Rights Council \(2022\) Cooperation with the United Nations, its representatives and mechanisms in the field of human rights - Report of the Secretary-General. A/HRC/51/47:](#)

existing in our collective efforts are closed”.<sup>3</sup> However, more must be done to ensure that the UN is an open, safe, and inclusive environment for civil society to participate in.

We have developed the following call to action:

1. States commit, including through establishing new, or joining existing groups of likeminded states, to defend and improve language on civil society inclusion across the UN system, ensuring that attempts to exclude civil society actors are unsuccessful.
2. States agree to work to improve the ECOSOC NGO Committee processes, making use of existing working methods and the possibility of reform, to ensure a pluralism within accredited NGOs.
3. States agree to strive for improvements in the protection of civil society actors who engage in UN processes and the monitoring and reporting of reprisals of individual cases.

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<sup>3</sup> [United Nations General Assembly, Joint Statement on Reprisals - UNGA 77 Third Committee](#)