

Building partnerships through meaningful consultation: 7 practices for civil society participation in EU decision-making

October 2022

Over the years, CONCORD together with its civil society partners around the world has produced a number of concrete inputs on civil society participation in EU international partnerships and external action decision-making. On several occasions, we have assessed what works and what does not in existing dialogue mechanisms and we have shared good practices and recommendations to improve participation opportunities. This document gathers the key messages of these previous efforts into 7 good practices, in order to define what meaningfulness entails in practice, and to continue our dialogue with the EU. It seeks to encourage not only a shift to action towards meaningful, inclusive and safe civil society engagement, but a shift of approach towards cooperation and co-creation with civil society in all its diversity, recognising the value of partnering and engaging with civil society at all levels and across all institutions.

1. Institutional culture shift

It is crucial to translate existing political commitments into political will and a change in culture and attitudes for real engagement with CSOs. This culture shift must stem from a recognition by the EU – at all levels and across all institutions and services – of civil society actors as fully-fledged partners.

- Ensure the presence of key stakeholders to guarantee meaningful discussion and share information proactively.
- Ensure that the responsibility for conducting consultations is not embedded in one unit, but that it is integrated in the ways of working of all EU staff across DGs and services.
- Reinforce human resources – and their capacity – in order to manage meaningful consultation at all times.
- The key role of local civil society and its complementarity to international actors should be recognised, and taken on board as a fundamental element in support of localisation.

The EU-AU CSO Forum ahead of the 2022 AU-EU Summit, although signalling a commitment to civil society engagement, was not implemented in a meaningful way. One of the issues identified was that it provided very little space for dialogue between CS and key decision-makers involved in the EU-AU partnership negotiation.



2. Create or reinforce structured and systematic dialogue mechanisms

Policy-makers need to create the conditions for a sustained, strategic and meaningful engagement with civil society actors. It is important to ensure regular exchanges between CSOs and EU representatives through integrating dialogue mechanisms in policy-making processes.

- Create spaces for dialogues on comprehensive topics as well as targeted issues, with sufficient time for civil society inputs.
- Design stable participation mechanisms and follow-up processes, to ensure a continuous, transparent two-way dialogue and feedback loops.
- Engage a diversity of actors in dialogue mechanisms and encourage mutual learning from different perspectives and areas of expertise.
- Consider sharing good practices and clear guidelines to avoid inconsistencies and improve the quality of participation opportunities across the board, especially when engaging civil society in regular or recurring processes through EU Delegations.
- Promote civil society participation in dialogues with other stakeholders (public, international, private sector) at all levels from local to global.

The variety of formats for the Global Europe programming consultations in 2020/2021 at EU Delegation level and Brussels provided many opportunities for dialogue. The European Commission should learn from the good practices and provide all services with further guidance in the future.



3. Co-creation

The European Union should aim at a systematic co-creation of its decision-making processes with civil society actors, beyond simple “tick the box” consultations. The EU should ensure a co-creational approach:

- In the agenda, for example by asking what priorities might be missing and being open to include civil society’s ideas, by opening calls for thematic sessions at the initiative of CSOs, or by letting CSOs shape sessions (including inviting speakers).
- In the format and methodology, for example allowing CSOs enough time to convey their messages, and ensuring that the platforms used allow direct engagement with speakers/ EU stakeholders.
- It is also key to ensure a methodology that allows for a constructive and meaningful discussion leading to concrete outcomes or recommendations.
- Consultations must take place at a point in the process where recommendations can still be taken on board and shape the final outcomes.

The GAP III Structured Dialogue was a good example of co-creation in terms of setting up the Steering Committee, suggesting certain items for the draft agenda and guest speakers and participants. However, there is still space for improvement, for instance, towards the use of co-creational methodology in breakout sessions, and ensuring constructive conversations and concrete outcomes rather than a series of statements.



4. Information sharing

A meaningful consultation relies on sharing strategic documents and information proactively, transparently and in a timely manner, to allow CSOs to prepare, consult and coordinate horizontally, including with our partners.

- Share quality information on the content of the consultation well in advance, at minimum one month before the consultation.
- Make the information available in relevant languages, especially when engaging with local CSOs and provide sufficient information to ensure a meaningful dialogue.
- Consider information sessions ahead of consultations, in order to prepare the discussion and ensure a level playing field between CSOs active at the EU level and local ones.

The EU-AU CSO Forum presented some challenges. The tight deadlines and the mounting workload for its preparation did not ensure proper consultation, engagement and horizontal coordination of civil society. There were several changes in format and structure with very short notice, as well as imposed topics. For these reasons, CSOs' involvement was poor and almost limited to the Steering Committee members.



5. Accessibility, inclusion and safety

The EU must ensure that accessibility barriers are not obstacles to the meaningful participation of civil society and that diverse voices are heard. Support might be needed to ensure accessibility to a large variety of civil society actors, such as small-scale producers, people with disabilities, youth-led organisations, women's organisations, indigenous and minority rights organisations, and other marginalised groups, to ensure a more intersectional approach and not limit dialogue to a small number of usual suspects.

General

- Consult civil society to identify and reflect on ways to overcome accessibility barriers.
- Provide interpretation in different languages (e.g. French and Spanish) as well as sign language and closed captioning.
- Formulate criteria for accessibility, and for a balanced representation of CSO representatives and speakers in EU fora.
- Ensure inclusive and accessible communication (in addition to translation/interpretation, avoiding EU jargon).
- Take further steps to ensure geographic accessibility (for those who need to travel to in-person meetings), and physical accessibility to the venue.
- Take safety issues into account, in particular when engaging with activists and human rights defenders in partner countries.
- Share best practices and produce internal guidance on how to ensure accessibility, inclusion and safety.

Online

Online consultations can be a great opportunity to have a wider reach. However, opportunities for participation online should not be a substitute for physical participation. Most of the general recommendations above apply to online opportunities. In addition, the EU should:

- Make sure that the meetings allow participants to join from different time zones.
- Ensure online safety, for example by using secure platforms with encryption.
- Be attentive to and mitigate the effects of the digital divide in the access to online platforms, for example by sharing guidelines and technical training on how to use the online platform, ensuring that it is accessible for persons with disabilities, and that the platform is not too demanding to access in case of a poor internet connection.
- Use platforms that are interactive and that enable two-way communication.

- Consider establishing a Connectivity Fund aimed at providing direct financial support to session organisers, speakers, and civil society participants who need additional bandwidth or increased connectivity in order to effectively participate.

6. Autonomy to self-organise

It is also important to give CSOs the autonomy to self-organise. Civil society needs safe spaces to convene, identify issues and priorities, and design solutions and actions. The EU should support spaces where civil society can:

- Connect and collaborate.
- Define its own priorities or topics of discussion beyond those identified by the EU.
- Specific mechanisms could be put in place around key multi-stakeholder events such as high-level Summits, Forum etc, to provide financial resources to civil society to enable it to organise (e.g. facilitating travel for partners from around the world).

7. Ensure transparency and accountability

A meaningful partnership depends on clarity of scope, of objectives and on the feedback loop.

- Be clear about the purpose of engagement with CSOs and formulate clear expectations.
- Ensure effective and transparent feedback mechanisms following consultations, communicate openly and share information with CSOs about the impact of their involvement on policy or programming processes, how inputs will be taken into account and to what extent. This can be done for example through publicising results online, following up via email, or by organising a follow-up meeting.
- Do not claim in external communications that a participatory process or comprehensive civil society consultation has taken place when it has not. It is civil society who should decide if a consultation was adequate.

RESOURCES

GAP III Structured Dialogue: CONCORD feedback and recommendations (2022)

CSO Forum (AU-EU Summit): CONCORD feedback and recommendations (2022)

CONCORD paper: Promotion of civic space and enabling environment in EU external action (2018)

OECD DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance (2021)

UNmute Civil Society: Recommendations to ensure meaningful civil society participation at the United Nations (2021)



This publication was co-funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of CONCORD and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

OUR MEMBERS

