



Enabling participation of national NGOs and Civil Society Organisations in international events

Standard Operating Procedures

This document has been initiated by NGOs operating in Yemen based on experiences in enabling and ensuring increased CSOs engagement in regional and global events. ©2024

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Introduction

Global humanitarian centres in Geneva, New York and Brussels provide essential space for humanitarian policy and operational dialogues, involving Member States, United Nations agencies, Red Cross & Red Crescent Movement, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs)¹, who participate either through their established representative offices or by sending their representatives from around the world.

Compared to larger, well-resourced international NGOs, a vast majority of smaller organisations, especially those based in the Global South and which mainly cover countries affected by crises and protracted conflicts, do not have a permanent representation and therefore lack ready access to opportunities to engage. Furthermore, many CSOs and national NGOs most often have a highly limited ability to travel to locations where global events are held. This results in under-representation of national voices vis-à-vis donors, policymakers and the general public, particularly in major donor countries.

Following the predominantly virtual nature of events during the COVID-19 pandemic, participation in meetings and events had shifted to online presence. Since 2022, with the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, there has been a gradual increase in participation of local representatives in some high-level global events, but nevertheless physical participation by these organisations and individuals has remained limited. With the increasing shift of event formats to physical presence, representatives from local organisations are still mainly taking part as remote participants only. Aside from practical technical challenges, including poor connectivity, this, often results in limited engagement and a disconnect in information communicated. This approach further - unintentionally - conveys a distorted message regarding local participation, with potential negative optics regarding the prioritisation of local and national panelists' voices.

The objective of this paper is to provide clear guidance to NGOs who strive to enable an increase in physical participation and inclusion of CSOs and national NGOs in international

¹ According to CIVICUS the definition of CSOs includes "*non-governmental organisations, activists, civil society coalitions and networks, protest and social movements, voluntary bodies, campaigning organisations, charities, faith-based groups, trade unions and philanthropic foundations.*"

panel discussions, roundtables and other events. The need to ensure effective engagement well in advance, with the diverse range of event organisers, and to encourage them to consider the processes outlined in the document, will contribute towards an increase in direct presence and voices. The paper details key issues and challenges and provides recommended steps to address them. It is supplemented with Annex ¹, which outlines a practical step-by-step guide for enabling CSO participation in person, based on the example and experience of enabling CSO participation from Yemen.

Why the participation of local organisations in international events is essential?

Following the Humanitarian Summit held in 2016 and the commitment of the humanitarian community to the Grand Bargain, the international humanitarian system has recognised the essential importance of local communities and organisations in responding to their own needs. Furthermore, it is recognised that local and national knowledge and experience are valuable contributions towards strengthening decision-making and policy-making. Although slow, some progress in enhancing the support to local and national organisations has been made through increased funding and strengthened partnerships through the Grand Bargain commitments on localisation.

Furthermore, the humanitarian system has expressed a strong commitment to Accountability to Affected People (AAP), as one of the central humanitarian priorities for better-targeted, and more relevant aid - based on the real needs of affected communities obtained directly from them through meaningful consultation. Local NGOs and CSOs play a pivotal role in working within their own communities, being an actual part of them, benefiting from the trust they have built over years, along with a profound understanding of the contextual needs and challenges. They must be able to put their expertise, knowledge, and analysis towards stronger and more relevant humanitarian responses and they have a vital role in helping shape a more realistic understanding of these responses.

In line with this, the participation of local NGOs and CSOs in international events and meetings in Geneva, New York, Brussels and other European capitals, is crucial if the international humanitarian community is serious about engaging local and national actors and the relevance of national and community-based voices and perspectives on multiple humanitarian situations and needs. Their participation, regardless of the distant locations they may be coming from, should become a norm and an enabled standard process. In doing so, NGOs and CSOs can further strengthen the commitment to localisation and AAP and take concrete steps to remove barriers to meaningful participation in decision-making for affected populations.

Furthermore, Member States' international legal obligations also require them to create conditions - economic, political, social, cultural and legal - that actively support the ability and

capacity of persons, individually or in association with others, to engage in civic activities.² One of the key conditions to enable this is by creating shared spaces for dialogue and collaboration, and ensuring a space for civil society in decision-making processes at national, regional and international level.

The inclusion of CSOs and national NGOs in international discussions is empowering their equal participation in international debates. Their role in understanding individual communities, their strengths, practices, their needs and risks is central to an enhanced and well informed narrative of humanitarian crises. Their inclusion also supports their meaningful contribution to an improved decision-making and prioritisation of needs, and by supporting their participation in global debates, it increases their contribution to global coordination, and better information sharing. It also provides them with opportunities for networking, as well as increasing their visibility and opportunities for positioning on issues of relevance.

However, in addition to the continued low levels of quality funding, local organisations face other multiple barriers, including limited pathways available to them to engage in national and international coordination mechanisms. More prominently, their experiences and perspectives are barely represented in international meetings and events.

Purpose of this document

This document aims to support NGOs in identifying key bottlenecks for ensuring fair and proportionate participation of local NGOs and CSOs in international conferences, meetings, and events and to provide practical steps and mitigation measures in enabling their physical participation.

Objectives

- Improve the inclusion and participation of a diverse range of speakers from NGOs and CSOs (local, national, international) at high level humanitarian events including fora, panel discussions, roundtable discussions, conferences, and meetings.
- Improve communication between NGOs, CSOs, Member States and UN agencies to increase/enhance national organisations' participation in events, briefings, and meetings organised by UN, NGO Forums, and major donors in Brussels, Geneva, New York and elsewhere in Europe as required, by increasing their physical presence in such events, as relevant.
- Explore processes and preparations to enable the in-person participation of representatives of affected communities in meetings in New York, Geneva, Brussels and elsewhere and increasingly ensure all events include national representation.

²https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/CS_space_UNHRSystem_Guide_0.pdf

Challenges and recommended measures

- **(Challenge) Identifying the local NGOs/CSOs speakers/representatives in a timely manner, and in line with principles of diversity, and depending on the topic and relevance of the event in question.**

Recommended measures:

- If it is a UN-led event, advocate with OCHA in-country and/or RC/HC office for securing participation of CSOs representatives in the meeting/event.
- Engage with country offices of active INGOs with sponsoring capacities, or NGO fora (local and international), to identify the best placed local NGO/CSO representatives for events well in advance of the event (as communicated); e.g. prioritising the participation of women and youth from within the communities and countries concerned..
- Ensure a diverse and more equitable selection of potential representatives, covering a wide range of experiences, competencies, and gender, age, persons with disabilities, and geographical presence.
- Engage with event organisers to ensure any accessibility requirements are accommodated.
- The criteria for selection could include:
 - NGOs/CSOs' with strong community links/representation of communities;
 - Strong humanitarian track record, in a position to convey compelling and strong human stories on the impact of the humanitarian situation and the lack of humanitarian funding in their specific contexts.
 - Strong engagement and experience in gender issues.
 - Humanitarian portfolio from one or more sectors, including protection/GBV, health, WASH, food and nutrition, education.
 - A strong capacity to bring learning, experience and knowledge sharing to global platforms.
- Support opportunities to provide advocacy capacity building activities for CSOs at national level on an ongoing basis to strengthen civic space and participation.

- **(Challenge) Addressing the language barriers to increase wider and more diverse participation.**

Recommended measures:

- Strongly encourage the organisers to provide simultaneous interpretation in the languages relevant to countries in question, so that more diverse participation can be enabled.
- Engage with organisers to encourage steering away from the need for 'fluent' English as one of the criteria to be selected as speaker.

- **(Challenge) Funding of the cost for local NGOs/CSOs participation in international meetings and events.**

Recommended measures:

- Identify in advance funding opportunities from NGOs and donors to fund local NGOs / CSOs participation in international events.
- Map existing financial pathways to ensure national participation, including funding opportunities for female representation.

➤ **(Challenges) Challenges in coordination and information on planned events - Slow planning from organisers/impossible to plan annually/last minute planning - Lack of clarity of objectives of co-host Member States - Lack of consultation with NGOs on the agenda and timely representation of local NGOs & CSOs.**

Recommended measures:

- To ensure that this becomes practice, engage and discuss with event organisers (UN, Member States/donors, and others) on how to address challenges related to timing and advance planning and how to ensure timely decisions on agenda and panelists are made .
- In order to facilitate visa processes at embassies, advocate with organisers of events to engage with ministries of foreign affairs of host countries, informing them of the significance of participation, so that this is relayed to embassies for facilitating visa issuance. For example, this could be raised with donor Member States reps in Geneva, asking for their support with the relevant authorities in the capitals.
- Advocate with co-host Member States on early inclusion of local NGOs / CSOs in the event (e.g., Sweden and Switzerland on Yemen; or Qatar, UK and Germany on Afghanistan, etc).
- Tentatively map-out key events of the year, to identify possible participation of local NGOs / CSOs (for instance, pledging events for Afghanistan, Yemen, and Ukraine are likely happening each year - co-hosted by the same Member States and the UN). Once these are determined and identified, an initial list of potential candidates to put forward should be considered as a matter of time effectiveness.
- As different countries have varied visa processes and timelines, depending on nationalities requiring visas, and depending on the countries that are issuing visas, each context needs to identify the minimum timeline required for organising a visit of a local NGO/CSO representative.
- Advocate with Member States and UN to invest dedicated resources, funding and personnel to support CSO participation in events, including ensuring more participation from women-led or gender-focused organisations.
- Ensure regular engagement (e.g. through monthly meetings) between Geneva-based NGOs and OCHA on planned events, discussing the theme/agenda, to gain as much preparation time to support local NGOs / CSOs inclusion in meetings. This should also be extended to those present in Brussels and New York.
- In collaboration with local NGOs / CSOs encourage OCHA and co-hosting states to collaboratively formulate agendas with local NGOs/CSOs whenever feasible, ensuring that these agendas effectively encompass their concerns.
- Reach out to other UN agencies and donors and establish regular planning meetings to discuss upcoming opportunities.
- Immediately upon learning about event plans (even if tentative) engage with their relevant co-hosts, initiate contact with INGOs who partner with local NGOs or CSOs for

a seat on the panel, as well as maximise on contacts already made for previous events. Put forward potential speakers with detailed bio and reasons for strong recommendation to include them in the list.

➤ **(Challenge) Short notice provided to participating organisations and speakers.**

Recommended measures:

- Agree with the UN and Member States to provide minimum realistic notice to facilitate organisation of local NGOs / CSOs participation. The sooner this is determined, the quicker the visa processes can be set into motion. Important to consider up to 4 weeks.

➤ **(Challenge) Travel, visas and administrative.**

Recommended measures:

Preparedness:

- Based on experience, identify the minimum timeline required for organising a visit of local NGOs/CSOs from each country, including identifying the speaker and working closely with them to ensure they are comfortable and prepared.
- Based on experience, map out time required to obtain visas for local NGOs/CSOs participation for different countries/nationalities (these may vary). A minimum timeframe of 2-3 weeks is recommended.
- INGOs to engage with key Member States and embassies in countries and regions (especially those most involved with co-hosting and organisation of events, e.g. Sweden, Switzerland, UK, Qatar, Germany, ECHO/European Commission and the UN), to advocate for and ensure an understanding of the significance of NGO/CSO participation in events (including ensure national voices are directly heard). It is critical to work closely, in advance, with Consular staff by developing relations to increase understanding of administrative steps involved to ensure timely obtaining of visas for travel. Consular staff involved in issuing visas will be sensitised to the need to facilitate national participation and will work with the relevant ministries of foreign affairs in their capitals (and the donor entities/UN) to ensure a smooth visa application process for the purposes.
- Engage organising entities/states to not only provide an invitation letter but also write to the embassy and MFA of the country where travel is requested if needed (e.g. a donor writing to event's host country asking for visas to be expedited).

For individual events with set dates:

- Identify INGO focal point for supporting local NGOs/CSOs for participation in each event. This focal point will work closely together with event hosts/organisers and the representative selected to speak and help ensure the standard processes run smoothly.
- Prepare invitation letters for visa support. Where necessary, facilitate with the event organisers (and sponsors), hotel and flight bookings, ensure travel insurance is acquired etc.

For ease of processes, Annex 1 provides a step-by-step checklist/guide, based on recent experiences and learning gained from facilitating participation of Yemeni CSOs in Brussels and Geneva.

This SoP will be updated to incorporate further learning and insights gained from various events so that the situations will be applicable to as wide a range of countries and contexts as possible.

Annex 1

Practical step-by-step guide for enabling CSO participation in person in global/regional meetings

This annex complements and accompanies the Standard Operation Procedures¹ for CSO engagement by providing further details on all the practical steps that need to be undertaken for ensuring in-person participation of CSOs in international/regional events. The processes identified below are based on examples experienced in ensuring participation of CSO representatives from Yemen to meetings in Brussels and Geneva.

Prior to travel:

Action/Steps	Estimated timeframe
Identifying opportunities and events: Engagement with annual and one-off event organisers well in advance to promote and encourage inclusion of voices from national and international NGOs thus ensuring civil society perspectives.	Ongoing (continuous mapping of events)
Defining criteria for speaker: Outline speaker criteria based on the nature, format, and theme of the event, in line with the concept note. Ensure language interpretation is available to widen the options of potential speakers.	Where possible between 3-6 months before event.
Funding: Identify the sponsoring organisation, secure funding sources, and confirm budget available for the entire duration of the speaker's participation. In cases such as Yemen, this should include provisions for long distance travel, third country transit and/or stay for visa applications.	At least 45 days before event.

¹ "Enabling national NGOs and Civil Society Organisations participation in international events, Standard Operating Procedures"

<p>Preparatory discussion with event organisers: Initial dialogue with the event’s organisers focal point to ensure they talk to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the country hosting the meeting, is strongly advised at an early stage to verify processes and viability of visa issuance for the nationality of the potential participant. This will assist planning and decision making at an early stage before reaching out to the potential speaker.</p>	<p>As early as possible for general dialogue to develop buy-in and support for visa processes. Where possible 3-6 months before the event and not later than when a potential speaker is identified.</p>
<p>Identifying potential speaker(s): Outreach to contacts in-country to be made for support in identifying potential speakers. Discuss the concept note, details on what is expected from the speaker and how they can contribute and add value to the event to assist in-country contacts to identify and propose speakers. Alternatively, if event organizers have a particular speaker in mind, and with whom they may have had previous contact, direct communications (or through in-country organization) will be made.</p>	<p>Where possible at least 3 months before the event.</p>
<p>Selection: The event organizer/focal point will review the profiles of potential speakers proposed by in-country contacts of CSO representatives to speak at events based on concept note and defined criteria. Where several speakers have been proposed, these will be shortlisted, and the name of final selected speaker(s) will be communicated with in-country contacts. Availability of valid travel documentation required for travel and visa application will also be a determining factor in the selection, bearing in mind the timeframe available between travel arrangements and travel dates.</p>	<p>Not later than 2 months before event.</p>

<p>Introductory meeting: Meeting(s) to be arranged by in-country and host/organizing focal points with the selected speaker. The purpose, format and how they will contribute to the event to be discussed in detail with the selected speaker. Communication channels will be made available in the lead up to the event, for any queries and/or concerns the speaker may have. During the preparatory meeting, it is critical to discuss all aspects of their participation including safety and security, an outline of their contribution to the event, and their availability for the duration of travel, including third country transit for visa applications where this is required.</p>	<p>By 2 months before event – 45 days at the latest.</p>
<p>Preparatory meeting(s): Once the speaker has firmly committed availability as speaker, preparations will commence with frequent meetings directly or through in-country focal points. Communicate in a timely manner with all those concerned with any changes to plans and availability, issues that may affect travel support preparations through meetings (in-country/organizer focal points) or changes in the event.</p> <p>Travel focal point: In order to streamline travel arrangements, a focal point will be determined (either from the event organizer, in-country organization or other) who will lead arrangements including ensuring all travel documentation is available and valid. Any information relating to requirements for visa applications will be communicated to the travel focal point, including from experience with previous events or from online sources of the host country. As a standard process, the following documents will need to be available:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Link to the visa application website (either directly through Embassy/Consulate or outsourced visa processing entity) - Invitation letter from the event organizer (outlining the reason for travel and speaking role at event) - Business letter from the travel sponsor (confirming all costs of travel and logistics will be borne by the sponsor) - Provisional flight itinerary including flights to third country for visa application where needed (required for visa application) - Provisional hotel reservation (required for visa application) 	<p>Ongoing from selection of speaker, regularly.</p> <p>Between 2 months to 45 days before the event at the latest.</p> <p>The visa application time frame needs to be verified through contact with the Consulate of the host country and the process timed accordingly. Note calculation of days always based on ‘working days’.</p>

- Travel insurance (required for visa application)
- Other documents required from the speaker and their organization (e.g. registration of organisation, records of past travel to host country, letter confirming position/affiliation)
- Appointment for visa application to be made in close consultation with the traveler who will also be kept informed of the preparation processes.
- Should the speaker or their organization be required to pay for travel in advance to be reimbursed at a later time, this should be communicated clearly.
- Provide a logistics note ahead of time with any relevant information for the member's travel and stay. This should include currency exchange information, directions for travel to the hotel from the airport and return, focal point staff contact list, check-in and check-out details for hotel, and where to purchase meals etc. . Ensure a travel focal point is available for any queries/concerns.
- Where receipts are required from travelers in order to settle expenses, this should be communicated to them clearly prior to travel.

Yemen example:

- It is important to consider limitations in place for travel from Yemen and use of credit cards. Cash is the preferred method and more readily available for the traveler.

Travel restrictions for Yemenis, particularly female travelers, may require the option of the visa applicant remaining in a third country while the visa application is being processed (rather than returning to Yemen and coming back when visa is ready). This needs to be factored in and where possible, travel costs pertaining to extended stay in a third country while the visa is being processed should be arranged, budgeted for and covered by the sponsor.

Logistics note: as soon as participation and travel arrangements confirmed and not later than 20 days before travel.

Visa applications:

- Visa appointment is made either directly through Embassy/Consulate or outsourced entity. Timing for appointments is communicated with visa applicant to ensure availability, including all documents being available and valid.
- Where the participant needs to apply for visa through a third country, travel arrangements must be made for that purpose too, including entry visa to third country and accommodation throughout the stay while awaiting visa issuance.
- If the participant's return journey involves passing through the third country again, check if a new entry visa is required to apply well in advance to avoid travel complications. Accommodation during transit (if long) or overnight stay in third country will need to be considered and arranged.
- Method of payment for costs involving visa applications has to be clarified as applicants will need to make payment either online or upon submission of documents at the Consulate.

Yemen example:

- Travel for visa applications is normally required to Amman, Jordan. Visa for entry to Jordan will require at least 10 working days. Likewise, if the participant's return journey involves passing through Jordan again, the return visa will need to be applied for at least 10 working days prior to return travel date.
- Some host countries may require Yemeni nationals to apply from their embassy/consulate in other countries (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Oman, Qatar). Such requirements must be checked before travel arrangements made to third country and visa requirements checked and considered.

At least 20 days prior to intended arrival date.

Depending on third country visa processes, at least 20 days prior to intended arrival date (for visa application as well as transiting upon return from event).

- Where a female speaker is required to travel from Sana'a, sufficient timing needs to be considered if the traveller is required to travel by road to Aden. This journey will involve 12-14 hours as well as an overnight stay in Aden before boarding flight. The same itinerary will need to be factored in for the return journey.

Direct contact with Embassy/Consulate: Where needed, the organization responsible for the travel logistics can liaise directly with the Embassy/Consulate where the visa will be applied and/or seek support from event organizers and host country focal points at the relevant ministry of foreign affairs to provide background and more details and to expedite the visa process. This should be coordinated with contacts made by event organisers/sponsors with the host country's ministry of foreign affairs (as indicated earlier) to further clarify the purpose and significance of such visits.

Yemen example:

- Some host countries require visa applications by Yemeni nationals to be made in Amman, Riyadh or elsewhere. The requirements must be clarified early in the travel arrangements process.
- In one case, exceptions for Yemeni applications for Belgian visas were made for the first time and applications were submitted in Amman rather than Riyadh as is normally the case. Such exceptions need to be negotiated with the Consulate well in advance, prior to traveler traveling to Amman.
- Where travel to other destinations (such as Riyadh) is not possible for the traveler, this can be communicated by event organisers/inviting party both at Embassy/Consulate and Ministry levels to consider exceptions such as seen in the Belgian visa example).
- In one case, travel to a EU country that involves a Schengen visa was instead switched to a single entry 'national' visa instead of Schengen. E.g. visa to Belgium,

one entry only. This facilitated and expedited the visa application process considerably – on an exceptional basis. The same could apply for Switzerland, which is not part of the EU but is part of the Schengen area.

During travel:

Action/Steps	Estimated timeframe
<p>Responsibilities of travel sponsor/focal point/inviting party:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Support the traveler throughout their stay (including in a third country for visa applications where required). This should include e airport pick up and/or clear guidance on how to arrange transfers, outlined clearly in a logistics note and conveyed verbally. · Where additional in-person support is needed, provide the name of a focal point/contact person at the destination, including in a third country for visa applications where required. · Focal point at destination to provide a contact list in the logistics note prior to travel, including contact name for safety and security issues upon arrival. · Provide per diem for the duration of travel by the focal point/inviting party/sponsor. This should cover any prior travel from origin, to third country for visa application or upon arrival at the host country as appropriate. Options should be clearly communicated to the traveler and where advance payments are needed by the traveler and their organization, they should be made aware well in advance of travel. Should receipts be required for settlement of expenses, this should be clearly communicated early in the travel arrangements (see above). · Consider that some travelers may not have traveled overseas on their own before and navigating their way around could be daunting and confusing. Language barriers may also impact their ease in navigating. Provide support to ensure the speaker is able to comfortably travel, take part in the event and return safely to origin. 	<p>Reasonably in advance of travel. At least 20 days before.</p> <p>Depending on where per diem is being paid; at least 10 days prior to departure at origin or upon arrival at third country or upon arrival at destination.</p> <p>Throughout journey upon arrival to third country and/or final destination.</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where possible, organizing/inviting party should arrange for additional meeting opportunities to maximise on the visit. 	At least 10 days in advance of speaker's arrival to event's city.
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Upon return:

Action/Steps	Estimated timeframe
Settlement of expenses: The travel focal point/budget holder will ensure all expenses are settled and any amount due to the speaker will be paid based on financial processes (including receipts etc).	By maximum two weeks after traveler's return.
Taking stock: Gather feedback from the speaker once they return and share experiences from the whole process. Where constructive inputs that work towards improving future processes are provided, these should be recorded and factored into subsequent opportunities and shared among those involved.	By maximum one month after traveler's return.