

A Challenge Paper

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STRENGTHENING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

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In its original draft, the founding Charter of the United Nations was intended as an agreement between the High Contracting Parties – or the fifty governments who gathered for the San Francisco Conference during the last months of World War II.

A group of countries, however, made a counterproposal: the Charter should instead be issued in the name of “We the Peoples of the United Nations,” making it an expression of the aspirations for peace and security, human rights and justice, and social and economic progress of a new type of *global citizen*.

While the UN started as, and remains, an essentially intergovernmental organization, it has tried to engage directly with citizens from its earliest days. The focus on participation intensified in the post-Cold War period, with the current Secretary-General, António Guterres, describing it as “a key element of the inclusive multilateralism we need for 21st century global governance.”

In September 2024, the world’s leaders will gather for the Summit of the Future, which aims to “forge a new global consensus on what our future should look like.”

As part of efforts to transform global governance, this challenge paper argues that the Summit should be used to move beyond piecemeal approaches to citizen participation through a commitment to establish innovative, structural, and sustainable mechanisms that provide a legitimate voice for citizens in global governance.

This paper opens with a brief history of approaches to promoting citizen participation in the work of the UN. It identifies a need for inclusive models of participation and explores various options to address this demand.

It concludes with recommendations for the Summit of the Future and the subsequent cycle of international cooperation which will include the UN’s 80th anniversary, the election of the next Secretary-General, and negotiations of a new agenda to replace the Sustainable Development Goals.

The paper recommends a renewed commitment to informing global citizens in an age of division and polarization, more systematic efforts to understand people’s opinions, ideas, and values, strengthened participation for civil society, and regular use of a citizens’ assembly as a deliberative body at a global level.

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THE UN'S ENGAGEMENT WITH CITIZENS

The UN has multiple routes for informing, understanding, listening to, and working with citizens, but more systematic engagement is needed if it is to fulfill its commitment to inclusive multilateral cooperation.



While the UN remains intergovernmental at its core, it has increasingly opened its doors to citizens, engaging with the world's people in four principal ways.

Inform the world's citizens about the UN's contributions to people, planet, and prosperity

As early as 1947, member states [recognized](#) that “the United Nations cannot achieve its purposes unless the peoples of the world are fully informed of its aims and activities”.

Since then, the UN has consistently invested in broadcasting information about its work. Within the secretariat, the Department of Global Communications [works to](#) “tell the UN story” and to “build support for the aims and work of the United Nations”. It operates in 60 countries and communicates in over 80 languages.

In recent years, the UN has attempted more actively to shape global opinion, especially by [countering](#) mis- and disinformation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, UN Verified was launched to “[flood the internet](#) with facts and science while countering the growing scourge of misinformation”.

While [polls](#) suggest that attitudes towards the UN are generally positive, it is unclear whether citizen support for the UN translates into increased willingness of governments to work on shared solutions through the multilateral system. Information is the foundation, not the endpoint, of citizen engagement, in other words.

Understand people's values, opinions, and aspirations

From its early days, the UN also recognized the need to understand citizens, with the first Secretary-General, the Norwegian politician Trygve Lie, [telling](#) the General Assembly that “machinery has been established whereby the United Nations can itself be kept informed about changes of public opinion throughout the world.”

The UN has long been a center for the sustained collection of demographic and social data, for example through the [World Population Prospects](#) - [created](#) by Lie to provide “prompt and reliable information on the number and characteristics of people in different parts of the world” - or the Human Development Report, which was [launched](#) to explore “the essential truth that people must be at the center of all development.”

The UN has also attempted to explore global public opinion. The [MY World Survey](#), with 7 million responses, contributed to the development of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), while a similar survey [collected](#) more than a million responses from citizens on their priorities for the future and ideas for action for the UN’s 75th anniversary. The UN75 survey was supplemented by data from the Pew Global Attitudes Survey and by analysis of the global media landscape conducted by Edelman Intelligence.

These efforts have been sporadic, however. The international system lacks a regular barometer of global opinion, whether based on original data or drawn from external data sources such as the [World Values Survey](#) or the [Global Governance Survey](#). Ongoing polling efforts tend to be fragmented, with surveys commissioned by different parts of the UN system and no mechanism for sharing data more widely.



Listen to people's views when making policy decisions

The engagement of citizens, either directly or through their civil society representatives, was hardwired into the UN charter, with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) asked to “make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations.”

Over 6,000 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are currently in [consultative status](#) with ECOSOC. Member states [agree](#) that this allows NGOs to represent the views of citizens and to influence the work of the UN, while also allowing it to “secure expert information or advice” from non-governmental actors. For decades, NGOs have played a [significant role](#) in agenda setting and policy formulation, while promoting implementation and increasing accountability.

This role has grown as the UN has tackled issues that rely on broad public participation. In 1992, the Earth Summit [recognized](#) the importance of stakeholder engagement in sustainable development, leading to the establishment of a number of ‘Major Groups’ ([for example](#), for indigenous peoples, workers, or scientists) that continue to [play a role](#) in global frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Climate campaigners play a [pivotal role](#) in climate negotiations, [acting](#) as the “eyes, ears and conscience of the outside world.”

Direct consultation of citizens has become more common in the 21st century. Broad survey instruments have been supplemented by efforts to promote a deeper global conversation. For the UN’s 75th anniversary, for example, results from [3,500 dialogues](#) were analyzed, while a [digital platform](#) was used to develop policy proposals for consideration as part of the Secretary-General’s [Our Common Agenda](#). Targeted efforts have also been made to strengthen the voice of [women](#) and of [young people](#) in global decision-making.

This is a contested space, however, with civil society organizations [arguing](#) that a lack of political and financial will prevents their full engagement, and raising concerns [about](#) a “clear gulf between what is set out in principle in regard to civil society cooperation with the UN, and related procedure and practice.” Some member states, meanwhile, raise concerns that civil society organizations from richer countries are disproportionately able to shape international agendas, perpetuating inequality.

Half-hearted approaches can perpetuate exclusion, as seen with excessive jargon, language barriers, visa restrictions, and a lack of finance, making the UN accessible only to insiders. Civil society can also face deliberate exclusion, through a [backlash](#) that has included restrictions on travel to the UN, the expulsion of accredited individuals from UN spaces, and even threatening behavior in UN spaces.

Work with citizens as partners in the delivery of solutions to global challenges

The last decade has seen the emergence of a more ‘networked and inclusive’ multilateral system, with a growing recognition by governments that certain challenges can only be addressed through [partnership](#) with “all countries, all stakeholders, and all people.”

The implementation of the SDGs relies on a patchwork of partnerships at all levels from the global to the local, leading to a [range of efforts](#) to promote the active participation of citizens. For example, [citizen scientists](#) have made significant contributions to tackling pollution of the oceans (SDG14). Grassroots actors are on the frontline of efforts to help communities and people resolve and prevent justice problems (SDG16). The water and sanitation sector (SDG6) has developed an indicator [to track](#) the participation of local communities.

The door for citizens to co-design and deliver solutions to global challenges has been further opened by climate change, a crisis that [requires](#) profound changes in the behavior of hundreds of governments, millions of organizations, and billions of people. The first [global stocktake](#) of the Paris Agreement found some evidence that countries are engaging local communities in climate solutions.

Partnership with citizens has also become more prevalent in peace and security, a domain traditionally viewed as exclusive to states. International approaches to conflict prevention [recognize](#) the need for inclusive decision-making and for “broad partnerships across groups to identify and address grievances that fuel violence.” The active peacekeeping roles played by [women](#) and by [young people](#) are increasingly seen as critical to sustaining peace.

In some cases, non-governmental actors have an institutional role in the delivery of global priorities. [Social dialogue](#) between government, employers, and unions is enshrined in the structure of the International Labor Organization. UNAIDS has had civil society representation on its board since its inception, as part of a commitment to the [principle](#) that “people living with or affected by HIV [should] have a place at the decision-making table.”

Across each of these dimensions - informing, understanding, listening to, and working with citizens - the UN has demonstrated the normative, substantive, and instrumental case for inclusive approaches to international cooperation. As the Secretary-General has [argued](#), participation is not just a fundamental right, but a “tool for better policy making,” and “a way to build the ownership needed to reinvigorate multilateralism.”

But despite many positive models, citizen engagement is the exception in the current international system, not the rule. When it does happen, it tends to be intermittent, under-resourced (both financially and politically), and non-representative. Citizen participation tends to be sporadic, rather than structural, and often designed to ‘tick the box’ as opposed to meaningfully incorporating people’s views (see Box 1 - *The Seven Sins of Citizen Participation*).

As we will argue in the next section, sporadic engagement is unlikely to be enough, as an increasingly perilous international environment makes it essential for people to be active participants in global cooperation.

BOX 1

THE SEVEN SINS OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

1 **TOKENISM**

You need to be seen to consult but have no intention of changing anything as a result

2 **BAD QUESTIONS**

You ask a question that is too broad and/or complex to yield an answer that will influence what you will do

3 **NOT REPRESENTATIVE**

You ask LOTS of people to contribute but don't hear from those who face high barriers to participation

4 **NO DELIBERATION**

You want input on a complex topic but expect people to have answers off the top of their heads

5 **BENIGN MANIPULATION**

Convinced of your good intentions, you guide the process towards a pre-ordained result

6 **INFLATED EXPECTATIONS**

You expect citizens to solve a problem that has experts stumped and/or you're not honest with them about being one voice among many

7 **NO ACCOUNTABILITY**

You don't have a clear route to impact — so you fail to report back on what you have done with citizen recommendations

FROM SPORADIC TO SYSTEMATIC CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

As the world faces a string of planetary, security, health, and economic emergencies, the need for participation is becoming more pressing, requiring a renewed commitment to establish innovative, structural, and sustainable mechanisms that provide a legitimate voice for citizens in global governance.

The need for citizen participation is increasing for three interlinked reasons:

1 Demographic shifts are creating a larger and increasingly connected global citizenry

The current generation of young people is the most educated in history, while the global middle class will [expand](#) to 4.8 billion by the end of the decade. There are already 5.4 billion [internet users](#), an overwhelming majority of whom use social media. [Survey evidence](#) from 19 countries suggests that almost half of people consider themselves “more a world citizen than a citizen of the country [they] live in.” As a result, citizens increasingly seek a direct influence on global processes, over and above efforts to influence the positions and decisions taken by their country’s representatives on the international stage. Whether governments welcome it or not, demand for an increased role in global decision-making is likely to continue to grow.

2 A failure to engage with citizens risks eroding the foundations for collective action

While the world’s population is becoming more [politically active](#), it is also increasingly polarized and skeptical about public institutions. These trends are fueled by the failure of institutions to deliver in an age of interlocking emergencies and by leaders who amplify divisions as a political strategy. While democracies are [under threat](#) and civic space is [closing](#) in many countries, increased participation [provides](#) a “long, but proven, path to increase trust”, while promoting inclusive decision-making may be the [best antidote](#) to polarization and misinformation. The international system needs to model these behaviors if it is to safeguard its own legitimacy and become more effective over the next decade. By providing a platform for citizen action, it will also enhance the power of states to act, at a time when governments increasingly face threats that they cannot solve on their own.

3 Governments need public support for international action

Given the growing complexity of global affairs, governments need support from their citizens - and to understand that other governments have the same backing - if they are to strike deals that must endure across multiple political cycles. Many of the challenges we face require citizen action for effective resolution. To reach Net Zero by 2050, for example, governments must “undertake a series of integrated, interlocking, and uninterrupted actions over at [least three decades](#).” New challenges, such as AI governance, are likely to require similar levels of sustained cooperation, a challenge made harder by extremely high levels of policy uncertainty. Even in an intergovernmental system, member states must be skilled in reading global public opinion, and in understanding how it could change over time. Engaging people directly enhances the ability of governments to represent their own citizens, rather than detracting from it.

However, despite the models described in the first section of this paper, citizens typically find themselves outgunned within the international system. The contrast is marked with the growing role played by other non-state actors:

- **Experts play a sizable, if poorly documented, role in the international system.**

As far back as the 1970s, an official [report](#) found that the UN’s use of external expertise had “spiraled quantitatively and evolved qualitatively.” Nowadays, experts are represented at the UN through a large number of expert groups,¹ various ad hoc committees on which experts serve alongside government representatives,² and panels and

1 Such as the Expert Group on Public Administration and Governance or the Expert Group on Net-Zero Emissions Commitment

2 For example, the Ad Hoc Committee to Elaborate a Comprehensive International Convention on Countering the Use of Information and Communications Technologies for Criminal Purposes

expert bodies convened by the Secretary-General.³ The international system has demonstrated impressive innovation in providing experts with a structural role in its deliberations. Most notably, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was [created](#) in 1988 as a mechanism for inserting scientific expertise into climate policymaking.

- **The private sector is increasingly influential in global cooperation.**

For over a decade, the UN has had a [Framework for Business Engagement](#), under which UN staff are trained to establish “networks and solid, long-lasting partnerships between the UN and the private sector.” Secretary-General Kofi Annan created the UN Global Compact as “a [global movement](#) of more than 12,000 businesses... across 160 countries,” while an ecosystem of global partnerships rely heavily on the contribution of the private sector (examples include [Gavi](#) in health or the [Climate Investment Coalition](#)). UN entities also have many bilateral partnerships with companies, with UNICEF alone [listing](#) over 30 corporate partnerships it has formed to deliver the SDGs. Private sector cooperation promises to become deeper still through a [Strategic Partnership Framework](#) agreed between the UN and World Economic Forum and efforts to establish a [Global Digital Compact](#) at the Summit of the Future.

In a networked multilateral system, expert and private sector participation is certainly important, but it is noteworthy how limited efforts to involve citizens appear in comparison. The budgets spent on experts are orders of magnitude greater than those devoted to understanding, listening to, and working with people. There is no system-wide framework for citizen engagement that matches



3 Most recently, the High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence

arrangements in place for the private sector. Multi-stakeholder partnerships often provide a voice for civil society, but few provide the resources needed to level the playing field for grassroots organizations.

Most striking though is the failure to systematize the participation of citizens through innovations that match the ambition of institutions such as the IPCC or the UN Global Compact. ‘Global conversations’ have recently become part of the UN’s toolkit, but they happen on an ad hoc basis. In contrast, scientists have a permanent, structural role in international climate cooperation. The Global Compact has a strategy to “accelerate and scale the global collective impact of business” throughout the 2020s. There are no equivalent channels for promoting citizen participation over the long term.

Innovative models do now exist, however, with approaches being tested that draw on a new generation of deliberative techniques that can deepen citizen engagement on complex contemporary challenges. This [deliberative wave](#) is most strongly associated with citizens’ assemblies, which have now been used many [hundreds of times](#) at national and local levels in countries across the world. In 2021, the first [Global Citizens’ Assembly](#) was hailed by the Secretary-General as “a practical way of showing how we can accelerate action through solidarity and people power,” while young people identified it and similar deliberative models as an important way to allow them to “participate in discussions about policies that will impact their futures.” This pilot has [provided](#) a “blueprint for a new piece of global governance infrastructure” that could be used to place citizen engagement at the heart of the multilateral system” (see Box 2).

A permanent Global Citizens’ Assembly could be part of creating what the Secretary-General has described as a “permanent interaction” between people and political power, especially if deployed alongside other tools that are responsive to changing demographics and the need to decentralize power in the multilateral system. So how should this interaction be strengthened over the decade? How can citizen participation be made more sustained and systematic?

We address these questions in section three.

BOX 2

THE GLOBAL CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY FOR PEOPLE AND PLANET

The first ever global citizens' assembly was held ahead of the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Glasgow (COP26).

The Core Assembly brought together 100 citizens randomly selected to “provide a snapshot of the human family,” and was supplemented by Community Assemblies run locally. As well as influencing global climate negotiations, this pilot provided a “blueprint for a new piece of global governance infrastructure” that could be used to place citizen engagement at the heart of the multilateral system.

Building on this prototype, the Iswe Foundation is convening a coalition of organizations from around the world to launch a Global Citizens' Assembly for People and Planet, which would consist of:

- A core assembly with 300-1,000 people selected by a global civic lottery to be demographically representative of the global population.
- Community assemblies in which anyone can participate on the same topic as the core assembly.
- An impact network of governments, multilateral bodies, private sector, and civil society organizations, who support the Assembly by raising its profile and championing its outcomes either through implementation or advocacy.
- A cultural wave involving artists and influencers from around the world working to embed the Assembly in global public consciousness.

Sources:

2021 Global Citizens' Assembly Report

2023 Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis Evaluation Report

A Global Citizens' Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis, 2024

A ROADMAP FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

In September 2024, leaders will gather for the Summit of the Future, while 2025 is the UN's 80th anniversary year. These are opportunities to take concrete actions to make citizen participation in global governance the new normal.

A roadmap for bringing citizens to the heart of global governance should reinforce the normative basis for citizen participation, while committing to more effective mechanisms for informing, understanding, listening, and working with global citizens in ways that allow them to make a genuine contribution to the most pressing challenges of our age.

The Summit of the Future, which will “[address gaps](#) in global governance” and “[forge a new global consensus](#) on what our future should look like”, offers important opportunities to take this work forward, both through its formal outcome, the [Pact for the Future](#), and the platform the Summit will provide for launching new initiatives.

The zero draft of the Pact promises “a new beginning in international cooperation,” based on a foundation of renewed trust between people and the institutions that represent them. But in a Pact that promises concrete action, there are as yet few practical commitments to increasing citizen engagement. As negotiations continue, member states should take the opportunity provided by the Summit to support and invest in frameworks that take the active participation of citizens onto a new level.

Looking beyond the Summit, the UN’s 80th anniversary, the World Social Summit, the selection of the next Secretary-General, and the replacement of the 2030 Agenda present opportunities to entrench participation.

Strengthen citizen participation at the Summit of the Future

Through the Pact for the Future, member states should establish citizen participation as a new normal for the UN, while using the Summit as a platform for launching actions and initiatives that fulfill their commitment to inform, understand, listen to, and work with global citizens.

Renew the normative commitment to citizen participation

Through Agenda 2021, the 2030 Agenda, the UN75 Declaration, and other international frameworks, member states have underlined the need to listen to people's concerns and aspirations, as well as emphasizing the importance of amplifying the voices of women and girls, and listening to and working with young people.

The zero draft of the Pact contains a commitment to increase the space for civil society in the international system. This could be strengthened by acting on the [call](#) from the #UNMute civil society coalition for the Pact to initiate a review of civil society participation in the UN. Civil society actors believe their role could be strengthened through a [Civil Society Envoy](#), an Annual Civil Society Action Day, and various measures that [raise standards](#) for promoting civil society involvement and that provide the support needed for “a broader, more diverse and representative cross-section of civil society voices.”

The Pact could also support measures to increase accountability and transparency throughout the UN system, including through a strengthened commitment to an inclusive, merit-based and transparent process for appointing the Secretary-General and other senior UN leaders. Civil society can assist the UN by shedding light on the reasons behind recruitment decisions and the nature of the competing interests of states and other stakeholders who seek to influence appointments at the expense of the UN's independence.

The Pact, however, should look beyond civil society, taking the next step to make direct participation with citizens the new normal at the UN and throughout the international system. It should recognize the particular need to promote the voices of people from developing countries, while making the connection to efforts to ensure that women, young people, and children are able to effectively participate in global decision-making.

This normative commitment should be mainstreamed in other major outcomes from the Summit of the Future. The proposed [Global Digital Compact](#) should recognize the role of technology in providing an innovative and cost effective platform for citizens to be involved in global decision-making, while the Declaration on Future Generations should highlight the potential for citizens to promote longer-term decision-making to [safeguard](#) the interests of succeeding generations.

Launch new initiatives and actions that fulfill the commitment to citizen participation

The Summit of the Future provides a platform for launching initiatives that model new ways of solving global problems. This is an opportunity to launch concrete efforts to rebuild global support for multilateralism. It is also a chance for innovation across the full spectrum of citizen engagement.

First, the Secretary-General could declare his intention to strengthen the UN's strategic communication infrastructure in order to increase citizens' support for the values that underpin multilateralism, and combat polarization and misinformation while fostering collective action to tackle shared global problems. This is an opportunity to rebuild



the relationship between the international citizen and global publics, especially in countries where the majority of [future generations](#) will be born. It is most likely to be successful if the UN draws on the creative community for new ideas about how to communicate effectively.

Second, the Secretary-General could create a more robust system to systematically gather global public opinion on key challenges and solutions to help the UN and member states to prioritize and plan for the future. A barometer of global opinion, using sampling techniques that are representative of the world's population, could be used to identify citizens' views on challenges, solutions, and policy proposals, and could be run through UN Global Pulse or the new UN Futures Lab. Alternatively, the UN could create a mechanism for sharing data from existing polling, strengthening analysis, and building links to its decision-making.

Finally, the Summit is an opportunity for the UN to give citizens a permanent 'seat at the global governance table,' by committing to establishing a permanent Global Citizens' Assembly that operates under its umbrella but has the same independence as the scientists working through the IPCC. The Global Citizens' Assembly could meet on a regular basis to explore complex global challenges and provide responses that overcome current levels of polarization. A robust and representative deliberative mechanism body of this kind would allow member states and international institutions to directly engage with the concerns, aspirations, and ideas of the world's people. Suggestions for how the Global Assembly might operate in its early days can be found in Box 2.

Promote citizen participation beyond the Summit of the Future

Beyond the Summit, five opportunities can be used to entrench citizen participation within the UN and across the broader international system.

- The UN’s 80th anniversary year, beginning in January 2025 and encompassing the opening of the 80th session of the UN General Assembly in September, as well as the United Nations Day in October, provides an opportunity to conduct a global conversation on key priorities for global cooperation that builds on the UN75 and Summit of the Future processes.
- The Secretary-General has [proposed](#) a World Social Summit for 2025 and called for it to be based on a “different form of global deliberation.” Member states could use this summit as “an [opportunity](#) for shared decision making,” with citizens playing a central role.
- Also in 2025, COP30 will be held in Brazil, offering an opportunity to strengthen global climate frameworks as countries submit new commitments to cut emissions from their NDCs, while South Africa will host a G20 on the African continent for the first time.
- The selection of the next Secretary-General will take place in 2026, offering an opportunity for a transparent and inclusive selection process that [responds](#) to the aspirations of the world’s citizens (as discussed, above).
- Finally, the development of a new framework to succeed or update the Sustainable Development Goals in 2030 represents another critical moment to meaningfully involve citizens in decisions that will shape the future of multilateralism.

Citizen participation should be promoted across these – and other – opportunities in a strategic way, with the aim of achieving a sea change in participation by the end of the decade. Rather than a series of reactive and ad hoc initiatives, the UN could plan a rolling program of communication, engagement, and deliberative activities, with leadership from the President of the General Assembly and the Secretary-General.

As a minimum, this might include:

- A communications campaign, global polling, and deliberative activities that feed into both the UN80 celebrations and the World Social Summit.
- A commitment from candidates for the Secretary-General always to champion citizen participation, including by agreeing to establish a deliberative body for citizens alongside every high-level or expert body they establish.
- Active and early involvement of a permanent Global Citizens' Assembly, or similar deliberative body, in the design of a post-2030 development agenda.

Citizens could also play an enhanced role in promoting accountability, including as the 2030 Agenda concludes, in future Global Stocktakes of the Paris Agreement, and of commitments made at the Summit of the Future.

This would complete the circle from goal setting and policy formulation, through implementation and measurement of progress, to being accountable for promises kept, and would go a long way to guaranteeing citizens a meaningful seat at the global governance table, while enhancing the transparency and inclusivity of all parts of the international system.

