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Towards meaningful civil society participation at the international level: Success factors, opportunities and challenges

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Success factors, opportunities and challenges

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Executive summary

As international organisations, alliances and partnerships address increasingly complex global challenges, the need to incorporate diverse perspectives into their decision-making processes has consistently grown in importance. Civil society engagement at the international level has increased over the years and has become a common practice in many international entities as a way to reach the groups directly affected by their decisions and policies. However, recent global calls for more meaningful and structured participation by civil society and individual citizens have highlighted that challenges remain in ensuring such participation is systematic, impactful, and inclusive.

Enabling civil society participation at the international level can enhance the legitimacy of decision-making processes, foster citizens' trust, lead to better quality international rule-making and more widely supported outcomes in international decision-making. The 2023 OECD Trust Survey shows that trust in international organisations stands at 44% and confirms that participation is a key driver of citizens' confidence in government. In addition, civil society participation can help international entities build more effective policies and programmes that account for a variety of needs.

In this context, this OECD Working Paper aims to support international decision makers and CSOs in designing civil society participation mechanisms and processes that are structured, inclusive and effective. Building on a comparative analysis of existing civil society engagement mechanisms at the international level and dozens of interviews with officials and CSOs, it formulates recommendations to create more effective and legitimate governance processes that reflect the diverse needs of the global community.

Key findings of the Working Paper include:

- **Effective civil society participation at the international level requires certain legal and policy preconditions.** These include establishing strong legal and policy frameworks enshrining transparency, participation and providing for engagement mechanisms. A protected civic space is also vital, as it ensures that CSOs have the freedom to operate, obtain sustainable funding, and participate openly in public discussions. Moreover, a well-defined engagement strategy that clarifies the objectives, methodology, and expectations of the process is a necessary foundation for participation.
- **Fostering inclusiveness at every stage of the process is key for successful engagement.** Evidence shows that an inclusive and transparent stakeholder selection process that actively reaches out to underrepresented groups, taking into account diversity, expertise and the principle of civil society's self-selection, can make a major difference in the perceived legitimacy of the engagement process and ownership of the results. Inclusivity can be promoted in a variety of ways, such as aiming for geographical and thematic balance in participants, designing online and offline participation tools to palliate geographical and technological barriers, and providing capacity-building and practical support for stakeholders who may require additional resources and expertise to engage fully in international decision-making processes.

- **The governance of civil society engagement processes requires the creation of sustainable support structures.** Comparative examples highlight that institutionalising engagement by embedding it within formal structures helps sustain participation over the long term. In addition, successful engagement mechanisms rely on sustainable funding and on support structures, such as a steering body, a secretariat, or thematic working groups, that facilitate the smooth coordination of the mechanism and the effective formulation of the CSO messages.

1 Introduction

What is stakeholder engagement at the international level and why is it important?

In the face of global challenges that can only be addressed through international co-operation, such as the climate crisis or international security, effective engagement of citizens and stakeholders at the international level can lead to better policy decisions, increased ownership of global decision making, potentially better compliance and, ultimately, more legitimate outcomes.

In the context of this paper, international participation is understood as the involvement of non-governmental stakeholders at the regional or international level throughout the decision-making and policy cycle of international organisations and less formal partnerships or alliances (hereinafter, "international entities"), including on agenda setting, policy formulation, implementation and monitoring and evaluation.[1] All international organisations currently engage with stakeholders, although to varying degrees. Stakeholder engagement provides a practical vehicle to enhance the quality of international rulemaking and is therefore recognised as an increasing priority by international organisations (OECD, 2019[1]). Since the adoption of the Charter of the United Nations, which enabled civil society organisations (CSOs) to have a relationship with the United Nations (UN) for the first time in 1946 through the UN Economic and Social Council,[2] this type of engagement has grown substantially over the years. It has become a usual practice in many international organisations and partnerships. The UN Human Rights Committee recognised that the fundamental right to participate in public affairs covers formulating and implementing policy at the international and regional levels (UN Human Rights Committee, 1996[2]). However, there are challenges to ensuring such participation is systematic, impactful and inclusive. For example, there have been recent global calls for more meaningful and structured civil society participation (CIVICUS et al., 2024[3]) and individual citizen participation (Folly et al., 2024[4]) in the Summit of the Future 2024 and other international fora.

By engaging with civil society, international and regional organisations and other entities can improve their outcomes, whether policies, programmes, initiatives or other decisions, benefitting from input from specialised or concerned CSOs and individual citizens. In addition, engaging stakeholders helps international organisations and entities be more responsive to the ever-changing needs and priorities expressed by their beneficiaries or constituencies. This could help bolster trust in international organisations, measured at 44% by the 2023 OECD Trust Survey, i.e. on average, lower than the civil service, police or local governments but higher than national governments, even if large variations between countries exist (OECD, 2024[5]). Participation can also make decision making more inclusive by opening the door to underrepresented groups who tend to find it difficult to have their voices heard, such as ethnic minorities, migrants, people with disabilities and people living in remote areas. As a consequence, international participation can be seen as contributing to fostering trust and ownership of global processes by citizens and civil society.

While most existing policy analysis on participation focuses on national or local participation, a literature review and stakeholder interviews have revealed a gap regarding the international level as well as interest

in this less-explored field. Stakeholder engagement at the international level presents specific challenges given its larger geographical scale and broader language and cultural diversity than most local and national contexts and, in some cases, the perception that the themes discussed at the global level may have a less direct impact on people's everyday lives. This paper provides a systematic analysis of existing good practices and formulates recommendations to ensure such participation is meaningful. The paper focuses primarily on structured and continued forms of engagement, such as stakeholder engagement mechanisms, given that permanent and institutionalised engagement usually allows for more meaningful and sustained participation than one-off consultations. Nonetheless, more informal or occasional engagements are considered.

There are a variety of crucial stakeholders engaged at the international level, such as governmental actors, commercial actors and third-sector entities like CSOs, academia and foundations. Results of an OECD survey conducted in 2018 showed that the concept of "stakeholders" is broad and highly international organisation-specific (OECD, 2021[6]; 2019[1]). This paper focuses primarily on the engagement of non-governmental, non-commercial stakeholders and, in particular, of civil society, which refers to "uncoerced human association or interaction by which individuals implement individual or collective action to address shared needs, ideas, interests, values, faith, and beliefs that they have identified in common, as well as the formal, semi- or non-formal forms of associations and the individuals involved in them, distinct from states, private for profit enterprises, and the family" (OECD, 2021[7]) and especially of CSOs, understood as "an umbrella encompassing a variety of non-market and non-state organisations in which people organise themselves to pursue shared interests in the public interest" (OECD, 2022[8]). The engagement of individual citizens at the international level, which remains a rare but growing practice, is also addressed in some sections of the paper.

The OECD has been working on stakeholder participation and engagement for the past two decades. As a key milestone of this work, the OECD Recommendation of the Council on Open Government (2017[9]), the first international legal instrument on the subject, defines open government as a culture of governance that promotes the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation and sets a high standard on how to design and implement strategies and initiatives inspired by such principles. In particular, Provisions 8 and 9 of the recommendation stress the need to "grant all stakeholders equal and fair opportunities to be informed and consulted and actively engage them in all phases of the policy cycle and service design and delivery" while promoting "innovative ways to effectively engage with stakeholders to source ideas and co-create solutions" (OECD, 2017[9]).

Similarly, the OECD Recommendation of the Council on Regulatory Policy and Governance (OECD, 2012[10]) recommends that adherents commit to principles of open government, including "transparency and participation in the regulatory process to ensure that regulation serves the public interest and is informed by the legitimate needs of those interested in and affected by regulation" and the provision of "meaningful opportunities for the public to contribute to the process of preparing draft regulatory proposals and to the quality of the supporting analysis". The importance of engaging with all interested parties is further reiterated in the OECD Recommendations of the Council on International Regulatory Co-operation to Tackle Global Challenges (2022[11]) and for Agile Regulatory Governance to Harness Innovation (2021[12]). In addition, the OECD Recommendation of the Council on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People (OECD, 2022[13]) includes a provision to create mechanisms to consult and engage young people on global challenges, such as climate change and biodiversity, and digital technology policy.

The OECD Recommendation of the Council on Open Government (2017[9]) defines stakeholder participation as all of the ways in which stakeholders can be involved in the policy cycle and service design and delivery, including:

- **Information**: An initial level of participation characterised by a one-way relationship in which the government produces and delivers information to stakeholders. It covers both on-demand provision of information and "proactive" measures by the government to disseminate information.

- **Consultation**: A more advanced level of participation that entails a two-way relationship in which stakeholders provide feedback to the government and vice-versa. It is based on the prior definition of the issue for which views are being sought and requires the provision of relevant information, in addition to feedback on the outcomes of the process.
- **Engagement**: When stakeholders are given the opportunity and necessary resources (e.g. information, data and digital tools) to collaborate during all phases of the policy cycle and in the service design and delivery.

This "participation ladder" reflects an increasing involvement of stakeholders. While this paper covers all three levels, its recommendations aim to support international organisations and entities in achieving more ambitious levels of consultation and engagement.

Methodology of the working paper

This paper falls within the OECD workstream on open governance, guided by the OECD Recommendation of the Council on Open Government (2017[9]). It builds on the lessons the OECD Open Government team learnt throughout the years. This includes the wealth of knowledge and good practices collected and analysed in the Open Government Toolkit and case navigator[3] and in international reports on innovative citizen participation (OECD, 2022[14]) and on the protection and promotion of civic space (OECD, 2022[8]). It also includes the experience gained supporting countries to assess, conceive and promote mechanisms for stakeholder engagement across OECD member countries, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa region, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Asia-Pacific region.

The paper also considers the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance (2021[7]), a global benchmark for civil society engagement in development policies and programmes. It further takes into account the OECD Recommendation of the Council on Regulatory Policy and Governance (2012[10]), which promotes stakeholder engagement in rulemaking, the OECD Recommendation on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People (2022[13]) and the OECD Compendium of International Organisations' Practices (2021[6]). In particular, the latter highlights five key principles and steps that international organisations may consider in engaging stakeholders, which will be referenced throughout this paper.

This document has been drafted following a comparative and participatory process anchored on the OECD's long-standing experience promoting and evaluating open government policies. It has also built on the OECD's methodology for conducting reviews and scans. For this paper, the OECD has conducted a comparative analysis of over 25 international stakeholder engagement mechanisms and over 40 interviews of institutional and civil society actors.

Some of the research that fed into this paper was conducted in the context of the OECD project "Towards meaningful stakeholder engagement in the new OACPS-EU Partnership Agreement" (2022-24). This initiative, funded by the European Commission's Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), aimed at conceiving an instrument to facilitate and regulate the participation of civil society and other relevant stakeholders within the partnership between the European Union (EU) and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS).

Comparative analysis of existing good practices

A key pillar of the methodology has been a comparative analysis of existing international stakeholder engagement mechanisms to identify existing good practices. After mapping key mechanisms that exist at the global level, the OECD studied several of them to identify their strengths and challenges as well as analyse the lessons they had learnt. An effort was made to study diverse mechanisms that adopt a wide range of approaches and focus on different regions and constituencies.

The following 26 supranational stakeholder engagement mechanisms were studied:

- The Consultative Committee of the CARIFORUM-EU Economic Partnership Agreement
- The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
- The Conference on the Future of Europe
- The European Union Policy Forum on Development
- The European Economic and Social Committee
- The European Semester consultation process
- The Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSIPM) of the UN Committee on World Food Security
- The Framework for Dialogue between the DAC and Civil Society Organisations
- Civil society participation in the African Union-European Union (AU-EU) Human Rights Dialogue
- The regional and global Civil Society Engagement Mechanism for the 2030 Agenda (including the UN practical guide created for this purpose) and the Beyond 2015 campaign
- Participation mechanisms in the Organization of American States bodies
- The Open Government Partnership
- The West Africa Civil Society Forum within Economic Community of West African States
- The CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness
- The Global Assembly community
- The Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism
- The Majalat Project
- The Forum on Information and Democracy
- Participation in the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (Escazú Agreement)
- Participation in the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters ("Aarhus Convention")
- The Universal Health Coverage 2030 Civil Society Engagement Mechanism
- The UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board
- The UN Democracy Fund Advisory Board
- The Community of Democracies' Civil Society Pillar
- C20, the Civil society engagement group of the G20
- Council of Europe Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations

Through desk research and fact-checking interviews, the OECD team studied the general objective of each mechanism, their bodies and governance structure, membership and the procedures to become a member or participant, funding models, outputs, such as declarations and policy papers, and overall strengths and weaknesses.

Participatory approach: Consultation with relevant stakeholders

Another key aspect of the methodology has been the consultation of diverse stakeholders to gauge their views and inputs on existing stakeholder engagement mechanisms and the key elements of successful international participation. The stakeholders interviewed included officials from international entities, civil society networks and organisations, youth organisations and independent experts.

Questions during the interviews included: their views on the governance arrangements; the effective co-ordination at the global, regional, national and local levels and preferred engagement tools; selection methods for CSOs and individuals to be part of a mechanism; ideas on how to ensure diversity and inclusiveness of all groups, especially those that tend to be underrepresented; and ideas on how the authorities could provide meaningful feedback to the stakeholders who provided inputs. Some questions also focused on capacity building and support for CSO participation, monitoring and evaluation strategies and the transparency and accountability of the engagement mechanism. The interviews also aimed to discuss the good practices of some of the existing mechanisms mentioned above and identify any additional ones that the stakeholders found particularly meaningful for stakeholder engagement.

In addition, the OECD and the European Commission's DG INTPA conducted a survey of Africa-Europe Week 2022 participants with questions on whether they wish to be involved in the Africa-EU and OACPS-EU partnerships, the results of which have fed this paper. The survey addressed concrete questions to participants, including whether they are interested in or currently engaging with the partnerships, which topics they would like to be engaged in, through which tools and with what frequency. The questionnaire also asked for suggestions on existing, successful engagement mechanisms, how stakeholder engagement should work in practice and what elements would make it successful. Over 600 respondents completed the survey.

Peer review

The OECD routinely involves "peer reviewers" as part of its long-standing methodology when conducting its reviews and scans. These are senior officials from the OECD member or partner countries whose role is to provide their point of view, analysis, constructive criticism and recommendations. Their role is officially acknowledged in the OECD publications. This paper has been peer reviewed by a representative of Finland (Ministry for Foreign Affairs) and partly builds on a previous project involving peers from Belgium (Enabel) and Sweden (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) who provided comments, inputs and their own recommendations.

Models of engagement: A comparative overview

International entities have a variety of options to channel participation when engaging stakeholders internationally, which can be tailored to reflect the unique context, objectives and desired outcomes of the engagement efforts, as reflected by OECD research (OECD, 2016[15]; 2021[6]). The chosen model of stakeholder participation should reflect a system that empowers stakeholder voices as key actors and provide the adequate institutional framework for them to feel output ownership and legitimacy regardless of whether their specific positions and proposals were adopted.

This section outlines the main modalities currently used by international entities to engage stakeholders on the international stage. On occasion, these models are used in combination with one another. Integrating different but complementary stakeholder participation models can allow for wider participation of organised civil society, as well as of individual citizens when the need arises.

Stakeholders as participants or observers of official bodies

The first model often used by large international organisations is the presence of stakeholders as participants or observers in official bodies. Such an arrangement is a valuable option because it enables mainstreaming stakeholder views. They can provide input throughout the entire policy decision-making process and potentially co-create common positions and other official documents. Official bodies may include an institution's general assembly, governing body and substantive/expert working groups, among others.

When stakeholders have participant status, they are part of official bodies in equal standing with governments and often have decisional rights in official procedures, such as voting and approving documents. The use of this modality remains rare in the context of international organisations. Still, it can be seen for example in the Open Government Partnership Steering Committee, which comprises 22 members (11 from national governments and 11 from civil society), with parity maintained between the 2 constituencies.

A much more frequent option in international entities and bodies is granting observer status to relevant stakeholders. Observers' rights, also known as "consultative" rights, vary from one organisation to another and may include, among others: i) submission of proposals; ii) collaboration in agenda setting; iii) attendance and intervention (orally and in writing) to formal and/or informal meetings and break-out sessions of the bodies; and iv) membership of relevant advisory bodies and working groups that may be established.

These options, especially when a wide range of rights is granted, have strengths given that they allow civil society to have a seat at the table as from agenda setting, take part in discussions with government representatives, reflect their views in the official records of the organs' meetings, and potentially influence substantive outcomes.

Granting participant or observer status should include the possibility of participating in preparatory meetings leading up to or following official meetings, where many relevant discussions take place. As a drawback, it is insufficient to ensure meaningful participation given that it lacks a dedicated space for stakeholders to interact and co-ordinate, and does not in itself guarantee that international entities will give appropriate consideration to stakeholders' inputs and feedback.

Establishment of a stakeholder advisory body

Another format, used separately or in conjunction with the above, involves creating a separate stakeholder advisory body that channels inputs to international entities. This opens a space for stakeholder co-ordination and elaboration of common positions. If this approach is adopted, provisions should be made on how the entities are to consider advisory body views and recommendations. Clear guidelines need to be established on when, how often, on which topics and how stakeholder views and inputs are shared and taken into account by the official entities.

Stakeholders interviewed in the framework of this study highlighted the importance of any engagement mechanism remaining independent from governments to avoid undue influence and provide input freely, which would be a fundamental strength of establishing a stakeholder-only body. By contrast, this format alone significantly reduces the opportunity for stakeholders to be "at the table" during negotiations and for their views to be mainstreamed into policy processes if the separate body is not invited to negotiations. It could also lead to sidelining inputs if the separate body is configured as purely consultative. As such, creating these bodies should ideally be combined with granting stakeholders participant or observer status. Such a combination would provide a strong avenue for structured stakeholder participation.

Creation of a mixed body gathering authorities and stakeholders

A third existing model creates a specific body with representation from both civil society and governmental authorities from international entities to discuss inputs. It differs from the first model in that it implies creating an ad hoc space for discussion among stakeholders and authorities, instead of stakeholders' integration into official bodies and procedures, although both options can be implemented jointly. As key benefits, a mixed representation body can provide an opportunity for stakeholders and international entities to discuss and co-ordinate closely, building trust and institutionalising the collaboration on a rolling basis. It could also help bring technical-level representatives together, hence facilitating content discussions. At the same time, if a mixed body is created, additional solid structures should be set up to allow stakeholders

to discuss among themselves and co-ordinate positions ahead of mixed body meetings with government officials.

Box 1.1 provides some examples of international stakeholder participation models.

Box 1.1. Models for structured stakeholder engagement

Civil Society and Indigenous People's Mechanism (CSIPM) at the UN Committee on World Food Security

The UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) works to ensure food security and nutrition for all. As part of its reform process in 2007, the CSIPM was created as a core part of the CFS Advisory Group, a joint body that brings together the CFS Bureau and stakeholder representatives (which also includes a private sector engagement mechanism, philanthropic organisations, financial and UN institutions).

All members of the advisory group are official participants of the CFS Plenary, providing them the right to attend, intervene and make written proposals within all committee meetings. The existence of stakeholder participants, as opposed to observers, in a UN committee is rare and is in line with the CFS vision to become "the foremost inclusive international and intergovernmental platform for a broad range of committed stakeholders to work together in a coordinated manner" (UN Committee on World Food Security, 2009[16]) . In intersession periods, the CSIPM holds eight seats in the advisory group and is in a direct position to advise the committee bureau on its policy decision-making processes by consolidating, facilitating and sharing the CSOs' common positions on CFS policy issues. However, it must be noted that the stakeholder part of the advisory group does not have voting rights and the bureau is not obligated to adopt their proposals.

The Open Government Partnership (OGP)

In 2011, the OGP was created by government leaders and civil society advocates to promote transparent, participatory, inclusive and accountable governance. The partnership now includes 77 countries and 106 local governments representing over 2 billion people and thousands of CSOs.

The OGP steering committee (SC) is its executive and decision-making body. Its role is to develop, promote and safeguard OGP values, principles and interests, establish OGP core ideas, policies and rules and oversee the functioning of the partnership. The SC comprises 22 members (11 from national governments and 11 from civil society), with parity maintained between the 2 constituencies. The SC has three standing subcommittees to support its work and each subcommittee is comprised of an equal number of government and civil society representatives drawn from the SC.

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) Programme Coordinating Board (PCB)

Established in 1994 by a resolution of the UN Economic and Social Council and launched in January 1996, UNAIDS is guided by a PCB with representatives from 22 governments from all geographic regions of the world, the UNAIDS Cosponsors and 5 non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives, including associations of people living with HIV. NGOs participate in equal standing with member governments.

The PCB has broad functions, including establishing programme policies and priorities, reviewing and deciding upon the planning and execution of the programme, reviewing and approving the plan of action and budget for each financial period, as prepared by the executive director, reviewing proposals from the executive director, approving financing arrangements for the joint programme, etc.

Cariforum-EU Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA)

As part of the Cariforum-EU EPA collaboration framework, six joint institutions have been created: the Joint Council, the Trade and Development Committee (TDC), the Parliamentary Committee, the Consultative Committee (CC), the Special Committee on Customs Cooperation and Trade Facilitation and the Special Committee on Agriculture. CSOs are involved in the Consultative Committee.

Through its annual meetings, the role of the CC is to be a platform where CSOs from both regions "can exchange views and discuss matters related to all economic, social and environmental aspects of the EPA's implementation". It can exercise this function on its own initiative or upon the invitation of the Joint Council for consultation. The CC is mandated to make recommendations to the Joint Council and the TDC, and the co-chairs may also be invited to meetings of these two bodies. It is also mandated to respond to requests for consultations on environmental issues or to formulate recommendations or opinions to the Committee of Experts. The CC is also free to draft reports or express opinions in its areas of expertise.

The United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

The UN ECOSOC is one of the six principal organs of the United Nations, responsible for co-ordinating the economic and social fields of the organisation. ECOSOC serves as the central forum for discussing international economic and social issues, and formulating policy recommendations addressed to member states and the United Nations System. It has 54 rotating members elected among UN member states.

Article 71 of the Charter of the United Nations foresees the establishment of "suitable arrangements for consultation" with relevant NGOs concerned with matters within the council's competency, which enabled NGOs to have a formal role in the United Nations for the first time in 1946. This relationship is governed by ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31, "Consultative Relationship between the United Nations and non-governmental organisations", which establishes the criteria NGOs should meet to be granted consultative status and follows a formalised procedure. Such organisations have the right to attend and observe all proceedings of the council, submit written statements, make oral interventions, participate in debates and informal meetings and organise side events.

Major groups and other stakeholders in the United Nations High-Level Political Forum (HLPF)

In the HLPF, major groups and other stakeholders (for more information on these groups, see Box 2.5) have been granted participatory opportunities through UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/67/290. Paragraph 15 of the resolution states that, while retaining the intergovernmental character of the HLPF, Major group representatives and other relevant stakeholders shall be allowed to:

- Attend all official meetings of the forum.
- Have access to all official information and documents.
- Intervene in official meetings.
- Submit documents and present written and oral contributions.
- Make recommendations.
- Organise side events and round tables in co-operation with member states and the Secretariat.

Sources: CSIPM (n.d.[17]), *What Is the CSIPM?*, https://www.csm4cfs.org/what-is-the-csm/; EESC (n.d.[18]), *Cariforum-EU Consultative Committee*, https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/sections-other-bodies/other/cariforum-eu-consultative-committee; UN (2013[19]), *UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/67/290*, https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n12/496/00/pdf/n1249600.pdf; OGP (n.d.[20]), *Steering Committee Composition*, https://www.opengovpartnership.org/about/who-we-are/steering-committee/sc-composition/.

Participation of stakeholders on specific policy and legal instruments and ahead of large events

Stakeholders' consultation on international policy and legal documents is generally more meaningful if arranged as a regular, structured and institutionalised exercise through one of the above methods. However, many international organisations also conduct ad hoc, one-off stakeholder consultations.

It is a relatively usual practice to seek stakeholder inputs or comments for specific instruments, policies or strategies, generally proceeding according to a designated timeline, providing information regarding the relevant international instrument and outlining the nature of participation. These exercises are often carried out online and enable broad campaigns to engage the largest possible range of stakeholders, including some opportunities for the public to contribute (OECD, 2021[6]). One meaningful example was the regional and global civil society engagement process to develop the 2030 Agenda (UNDESA/UNITAR, 2020[21]).

Another usual exercise is to engage stakeholders ahead of – or on the occasion of – large summits, such as by organising side events for civil society or specific stakeholder groups just before or in parallel with a high-level governmental gathering. While this can provide stakeholders with visibility and, in some cases, direct access to the officials, such events often intervene too late in the decision-making process, when most decisions have already been negotiated and sometimes already agreed on, which translates into limited to no impact on the outcomes of the related high-level events. In addition, stakeholder interviews highlighted that invitations for these meetings often arrive late and, in the large majority of cases, the themes to be discussed and the format of such side events are set by the international entities without meaningful opportunities for stakeholder input to the agenda.

International entities sometimes organise ad hoc dialogue events between stakeholders and authorities on a specific policy issue. These dialogues can allow undivided attention from the authorities to the stakeholder inputs that may otherwise fall to the sidelines in high-level events. However, to be truly effective, this modality would benefit from being conducted in conjunction with some of the other options highlighted above to ensure stakeholders have opportunities to co-ordinate among themselves, engage in the preparation of the dialogue, influence the format and agenda of the event and ensure follow-up.

Individual citizen participation

Another engagement modality involves individual citizens, either as an alternative or in conjunction with involving stakeholders. Taking into account and using individual citizens' experience and knowledge can help international entities tackle complex policy problems that require trade-offs or address long-term issues: indeed, evidence shows that representative, deliberative processes, in particular, have helped public authorities make difficult decisions on a wide range of policy issues at all levels of government for which there was previously political stalemate or a lack of evident solutions (OECD, 2020[22]). Furthermore, selecting citizens at a representative scale can embed engagement processes with added legitimacy. In view of this, citizen inputs may be requested to complement those of CSOs in addressing particular issues.

Including the views of individual citizens in the policy process may be achieved in several ways. One option is to engage them through digital means, such as through a website or platform, where they can access documents, contribute to open consultations and surveys, provide inputs, submit proposals, etc. This modality is increasingly common at the national level, where all OECD countries use digital tools to support citizen participation (OECD, 2022[8]). The Conference on the Future of Europe was a major exercise to carry out citizens' participation through both in-person and digital means at the pan-European level (see Box 1.2).

As a more formalised step, there has been a notable trend at the local and national levels in the past few years for public authorities to increasingly use representative deliberative processes for public decision making. There is a wave of experimentation in the purpose, design, combination with other forms of

participation, and institutionalisation of deliberative processes (OECD, 2020[22]). Representative deliberative processes provide an opportunity for better solutions as they tap into a group's collective intelligence and cognitive diversity. These processes have been carried out at all levels of government and have been most popular at the local level. There are a variety of models for deliberative processes that can be used, such as citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries and citizens' dialogues. The citizens' assembly is considered the most robust and elaborate model of representative deliberative processes (OECD, 2020[22]).

A key aspect that distinguishes deliberative processes is the selection of participating citizens through a civic lottery or random selection in a way that achieves a group representative of the overall population of that constituency, thus enhancing the inclusiveness and legitimacy of the outcomes. Such processes usually start with a learning phase, where citizens familiarise themselves with the policy question and consider a variety of diverse perspectives presented in person by experts, stakeholders and relevant groups, with a chance to ask questions. A key benefit of learning sessions is that they allow citizens to participate in an informed manner, basing their inputs on evidence. By contrast, in some public consultations, participants tend to provide input based on their perceptions.

These sessions are followed by citizen deliberation; when evidence is discussed, options and trade-offs are assessed and recommendations are collectively developed. All participants vote on the final set of recommendations and these are made publicly available and presented to the government authority. The latter often responds to recommendations by providing feedback to the participants and the broader public (OECD, 2020[22]).

Taking inspiration from these practices at the national and local levels, they are being increasingly applied to the global realm. The first-ever citizens' assembly at the global level took place in 2021 ahead of the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) (see Box 1.2) and has led to proposals for the establishment of a permanent Global Citizens' Assembly (Folly et al., 2024[4]). Various organisations have also called for the establishment of a permanent citizens' assembly at the EU level, which they view as an empowering tool to strengthen citizen engagement and trust in EU institutions (BertelsmannStiftung, 2022[23]; CTOE, 2023[24]; Democratic Odyssey, 2023[25]). International entities could consider setting up temporary or permanent citizens' assemblies or other forms of citizen participation to inform their decision making. These could comprise individuals across the main constituencies affected by the relevant international entities. Participants would be a microcosm of the general public; this could be achieved through random sampling, from which a representative selection is made to ensure the group matches the community's demographic profile.

Other options used by existing international entities include the public's open attendance at all official meetings and the participation of citizens in official organs through elected representatives. This is the case of the Escazú Agreement (see Box 1.2).

Box 1.2. Citizen participation at the international level

The Global Citizens' Assembly

The first-ever global citizens' assembly was held ahead of COP26 in Glasgow. The assembly was a CSO-led initiative intending to gather a global citizens' assembly to address environmental issues and influence global decision making. The framing question chosen was: "How can humanity address the climate and ecological crisis in a fair and effective way?". The core assembly brought together 100 randomly selected citizens to "provide a snapshot of the human family" and was supplemented by community assemblies run locally (see Box 2.4 for more details on the selection methods used). In addition to 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.

The Escazú Agreement

The Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, known as the Escazú Agreement, was developed in close co-operation with civil society, Indigenous groups, youth groups and the public. This aspect of the agreement, considered to be part of its core value and "genetic makeup", has been institutionalised in several ways in the agreement:

- **The Regional Mechanism**: In accordance with the Rules of Procedure of the Conference of the Parties to the Escazú Agreement, the Secretariat maintains a regional public mechanism whereby interested persons can register by filling in a short form available on the Secretariat's website. The main objectives of this mechanism are to keep interested persons informed about the Escazú Agreement and allow for their engagement, co-ordinate the public's participation in international meetings and contribute to transparency. Anyone can register online through a simple form to receive information from the regional public mechanism. An online platform forms the mechanism in practice.
  - At the same time, seven **public representatives** are elected through the regional public mechanism. Their role is to promote and facilitate the public's participation and channel its contributions, including presenting proposals on its behalf. Elected representatives consult with the public at large through the regional public mechanism. Their names and contact details are readily available online.
  - Public representatives have a seat on the Bureau of the Conference of the Parties, where they have the right to intervene but not vote. They also have two seats on the Agreement Implementation and Compliance Committee.
- **Open attendance to all Conferences of the Parties meetings**: All members of the public can register to attend Escazú's COPs and are accepted on a first-come, first-served basis. This can create challenges depending on the availability of space in the venues.

The Conference on the Future of Europe

The Conference on the Future of Europe was a citizen-led series of debates and discussions that ran from April 2021 to May 2022 and enabled people from across Europe to share their ideas and help shape a common future. The conference was the first of its kind, as a major pan-European democratic exercise, with citizen-led debates enabling people from across Europe to share their ideas and help shape our common future. This was done via an innovative multilingual digital platform where any European citizens could share ideas and both national panels and European Citizens' Panels (see Box 2.4 for more details on the selection methods used). With more than 5 million unique visitors to the platform and more than 700 000 event participants, the conference succeeded in creating a public forum for an open, inclusive and transparent debate with citizens around a number of key priorities and challenges.

The Conference on the Future of Europe concluded its work in May 2022, submitting 49 proposals to the European institutions. The European Commission drew up the first lines of action on proposals falling into its competencies in 2022 in its communication *Putting Vision into Concrete Action*: Four out of five new initiatives announced in the Commission work programme for 2023 are part of the commission's follow-up to the conference.

Sources: UN (n.d.[26]), *Regional Public Mechanism*, https://www.cepal.org/en/escazuagreement/regional-public-mechanism; Global Assembly (2022[27]), *Report of the 2021 Global Citizens' Assembly on, the Climate and Ecological Crisis*; Curato, N. et al. (2023[28]), *Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis Evaluation Report*; *A Global Citizens' Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis 2023,*

(Mellier and Wilson, 2023[29]); EC (n.d.[30]), *Conference on the Future of Europe*, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/conference-future-europe_en

Table 1.1 outlines the strengths and weaknesses of the observed existing models and points to existing examples that respond to the characteristics of each.

Table 1.1. Institutional arrangement models: A summary

Model	Strengths	Weaknesses	Examples
1. Stakeholders as full participants or observers in official bodies and meetings	• Provides a seat at the table for stakeholders, enabling direct engagement. • Can include a range of rights, such as right to attend, speak, vote, etc.	• Does not in itself guarantee meaningful engagement and would need to be complemented by other options. • Observer status can have limited impact and may be passive, depending on the rights provided.	• **OGP SC**: civil society are committee members in equal standing with governments. • **Major groups and other stakeholders at the HLPF**: stakeholders are observers and have a series of rights (attendance, intervention, etc.) in official UN HLPF meetings. • **Council of Europe Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations**: CSOs accredited as part of this group have participatory status in various Council of Europe bodies and official processes.
2. A separate stakeholder/ civil society advisory body which channels inputs into the institutions	• Full autonomy of the body in relation to governmental influences. • Provides a space for stakeholder discussion and co-ordination.	• Does not provide a seat at the table for CSOs. • Inputs could be easily overlooked or sidelined.	• **Cariforum-EU EPA**: CSOs co-ordinate their inputs in the CC and channel them to the policy-making organs of the Cariforum-EU EPA. • **AU ECOSOCC** was established in July 2004 as an advisory organ composed of social and professional groups of AU member states to provide an opportunity for African CSOs to play an active role in contributing to AU principles, policies and programmes.
3. A body with mixed authority/stakeholder representation to discuss recommendations	• Opportunity for close co-ordination and trust building between stakeholders and delegates. • Institutionalisation of the collaboration on a rolling basis. • Can enable technical-level discussions.	• Does not in itself allow the independent development of opinions or common positions from civil society. • May not be an official organ and may become isolated.	• **CSIPM**: stakeholders are participants in the UN Committee plenary and are involved in the CFS Advisory Group, a body with mixed representation from both authorities and stakeholders to discuss recommendations. • **Advisory Board of the UN Democracy Fund**: the board comprises the highest member state contributors to the fund, a number of UN member states reflecting geographical diversity, international CSOs and individuals serving in a personal capacity.
4. Consultations on specific policy documents or ahead of large events	• Allows the involvement of stakeholders in key moments of the policy cycle. • A side event may provide visibility and options for closer contact between stakeholders and authorities.	• Does not involve stakeholders throughout the whole policy and decision-making cycles, often with a lack of continuity and follow-up options. • Is often top-down with preset themes. • Side events may have a limited impact on actual discussions in the related large events and intervene too late to influence decision making.	• The **Africa-Europe Week 2022** took place in the margins of the 6th EU-AU summit in February 2022, gathering over 10 000 delegates from Europe, Africa and beyond. Hosted in a hybrid format and included over 100 sessions, panel discussions and concerts. • The Civil Society Forum during the fifth UN Conference on the Least Developed Countries in March 2023 started the day before the beginning of the conference and ended a day before the end.
5. A participatory platform and/or one or several citizen assemblies targeting individuals	• Inclusion of individual citizens, especially when complementary to other stakeholders, can enhance the transparency and	• High cost of implementation. • Unlikely to be helpful if provided with overly broad questions.	• The **Conference on the Future of Europe** included randomly selected citizen assemblies and panels and created an ad hoc, interactive digital platform open to participation by all citizens on a voluntary basis upon registration.

Model	Strengths	Weaknesses	Examples
	legitimacy of the process. • Can support institutions in tackling complex challenges		The **Escazú Agreement**: seven elected citizens take part in all official Conferences of the Parties and Bureau meetings as public representatives.

The stakeholder participation models presented should be tailored to each engagement's specific context and objectives. The nature of the target stakeholders, the issues to be tackled and the participation process goals all require thoughtful consideration to determine the most effective model or models. In general terms, OECD research suggests that combining these formats is the most effective practice, especially when it comes to including both stakeholders' and individuals' participation. To maximise the strengths of these models, it could be considered to provide participant or observer status to the stakeholders' mechanism while at the same time setting up an autonomous advisory body or a mixed-composition body for civil society to co-ordinate their inputs. These could be complemented by mechanisms to engage individual citizens through digital tools or structured deliberative practices. If more than one of these stakeholder mechanisms is established jointly, it will be important for each of them to have clear terms of reference and clearly define their relationship.

Further to selecting an appropriate modality or combination, international entities need to consider the weight that will be given to input from stakeholders. OECD research has shown that while a large majority of international organisations have put in place mechanisms to collect input and feedback from stakeholders, stakeholder participation generally remains non-decisional (OECD, 2016[31]). International entities could consider introducing co-creation practices into their policy-making processes to strengthen meaningful civil society engagement and provide stakeholders with a larger range of rights.

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Notes

[1] As defined in the OECD Recommendation of the Council on Open Government (2017[9]). It includes information, consultation and engagement.

[1] In accordance with Article 71, which reads "The Economic and Social Council may make suitable arrangements for consultation with NGOs which are concerned with matters within its competency. Such arrangements may be made with international organisations and, where appropriate, with national organisations after consultation with the Member of the United Nations concerned".

[1] Available at https://oecd-opsi.org/guide/open-government/.

2 Framing stakeholder participation at the international level: Preconditions for success

Successful stakeholder participation at the international level requires the presence of several foundational elements, which are the focus of this chapter. It begins by examining the policy and legal frameworks that are essential for enabling meaningful engagement, ensuring that participation is grounded in supportive regulations and standards. The chapter then considers the importance of civic space, exploring how the freedom and capacity of civil society to operate affect stakeholder involvement. It also provides guidance on setting up a stakeholder engagement strategy, emphasising the need to clearly define the engagement process' methodology, objectives and expectations. The institutionalisation of stakeholder engagement is discussed as a critical factor for embedding participation within organisational structures and processes. The chapter further explores the importance of identifying synergies with relevant existing initiatives. It addresses who to engage, offering insights into designing a robust stakeholder selection process that ensures inclusivity and relevance.

Policy and legal frameworks to enable meaningful participation

Evidence collected through the OECD Open Government Reviews and Scans shows that, in many OECD member and partner countries, a cornerstone of their participation agenda is the legal and policy framework, as many countries have legislative provisions or strategic/policy documents on stakeholder participation (OECD, 2023[32]). Some forms of participation, such as political rights (e.g. elections, petitions, referenda, etc.), are usually regulated by law or even by the constitution. In addition, some countries have adopted laws on citizen participation (e.g. Colombia's Statutory Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Right to Democratic Participation (Colombian Public Function Department, 2015[33])) or have put in place legal requirements to involve stakeholders in lawmaking, regulatory policy and specific policy processes (e.g. environment, infrastructure, land use) (OECD, 2023[32]).

At the international level, an explicit mention of the mandatory need for stakeholder engagement in an international treaty, the statute of an international organisation or the founding document of a partnership provides a solid basis for participation, in line with Principle 1 for stakeholder engagement of the OECD Compendium of International Organisations' Practices, which underscores the importance of adopting "a strategic and comprehensive stakeholder engagement approach" (OECD, 2021[34]). For instance, Article 95 of the new European Union- Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (EU-OACPS) Partnership Agreement (or Samoa Agreement), signed in 2023, acknowledges that "engagement with stakeholders, notably local authorities, civil society and private sector representatives, is integral to well-informed decision-making and to furthering the objectives of this Partnership", mandates that "stakeholders shall be informed in a timely manner and be able to provide inputs into the broad process of dialogue" and indicates that "open and transparent mechanisms for structured consultation with stakeholders shall be set up as appropriate" (EU/OACPS, 2023[35]). Furthermore, the Regional Agreement on Access to Information,

Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (Escazú Agreement) refers to public participation in the environmental decision-making process in Article 7. It establishes the obligation of each party to "promote, where appropriate and in accordance with domestic legislation, public participation in international forums and negotiations on environmental matters or with an environmental impact" (UN, 2018[36]).

In other cases, international participation is enshrined in a specific policy or strategic document. Examples include the Organisation of American States (OAS) Guidelines for the Participation of Civil Society Organizations in OAS Activities and the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Framework for Dialogue between the DAC and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) (see Box 3.1). A dedicated document can be a key element to formalise and institutionalise stakeholder engagement while providing some details or guidelines on the design of the engagement mechanism and how it works in practice. In addition, some international organisations and treaties integrate this dimension into their rules of procedure. For example, the rules of procedure of the Meeting of the Parties to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) establish that the Meetings of the Parties shall be open to all members of the public unless the Meeting of the Parties exceptionally decides otherwise and that the Bureau shall invite a representative of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that work in the field of environmental protection and sustainable development to attend its meetings as an observer (UN, 2002[37]).

Civic space considerations

A protected civic space is a key precondition for inclusive citizen and stakeholder participation. The OECD defines civic space as the set of legal, policy, institutional and practical conditions necessary for non-governmental actors to access information, express themselves, associate, organise and participate in public life. When civic space is protected, including the fundamental civic freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, association and the right to privacy, citizens and stakeholders can engage meaningfully in decision-making processes, evaluate government actions and outcomes, advocate for the needs of different groups, provide policy expertise, deliver key services and hold their governments to account, thereby strengthening accountability and ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives in policy making. More broadly, a healthy civic space enables collaboration between civil society, citizens and governments, allowing stakeholders to participate in public affairs, ultimately leading to more robust, inclusive and participatory democracies (OECD, 2022[38]).

While a discussion on how to best protect and promote civic space at the national and international levels would go beyond the scope of this paper, it needs to be emphasised that civic space is a key precondition for participation at the international level. Indeed, in order for citizens and stakeholders to engage with global and regional organisations, alliances and processes, they need to be able to enjoy their freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of association and the right to privacy or else it would be difficult (or impossible) for them to discuss, aggregate and convey their inputs. The protection of activists, CSOs and human rights defenders who might put themselves at risk by participating in international fora is of particular importance. This might be done through confidentiality measures, such as enabling anonymous contributions, especially on sensitive topics. In addition, OECD interviews have pointed to the possibility that, in countries with restricted civic space, stakeholders may be able to participate more effectively at the international level if they are part of a consortium or network, which makes it easier to contribute without being singled out.

Similarly, as international participation relies to a large extent on digital means (to facilitate logistics while cutting down costs), the protection of online civic freedoms and open and safe access to the Internet is

fundamental to allow individuals and stakeholders to make full use of digital engagement tools such as participation platforms, remote meetings, chats, surveys and virtual spaces for debate.

In the same vein, the right to access information, understood as the ability of an individual to seek, receive, impart and use information (UNESCO, 2015[39]), is another element of civic space which can support meaningful international participation. This right underpins government transparency, which refers to "stakeholder access to, and use of, public information and data concerning the entire public decision-making process, including policies, initiatives, salaries, meeting agendas and minutes, budget allocations and spending" (OECD, 2021[40]). Since the 2000s, there has been an increase in the adoption of access to information (ATI) laws and most of them require the proactive disclosure of a minimum set of public information. While international organisations, partnerships and alliances are not necessarily bound to these (national) laws, they should proactively and timely disclose relevant information to the public so that stakeholders can follow the entity's work, form informed opinions and engage meaningfully. This transparency aspect will be dealt with in Chapter 3.

Finally, an enabling environment for civil society, notably at the national level, allowing for the establishment and development of independent and robust CSOs, is a precondition for CSOs to engage at the international level. The legal and policy environment in which CSOs operate significantly impacts their ability to function effectively. Indeed, CSOs that can operate freely within a conducive legal and policy environment that safeguards freedom of association and provides concrete opportunities for collaboration with civil society actors at the national level, are able to analyse public policies and can engage in public advocacy, are better positioned to build a strong relationship with international entities, convey informed inputs and engage in meaningful debate.

Setting up a stakeholder engagement strategy: Clarifying the engagement's methodology, objectives and expectations

International organisations and entities should plan and act strategically for stakeholder engagement to succeed. In this respect, a whole-of-organisation stakeholder engagement policy would be beneficial, as it can outline a clear and comprehensive approach identifying when, how and to what extent consultations will take place, ensuring that stakeholder engagement is undertaken strategically and systematically with clear timelines, phases, mechanisms and systematic feedback (OECD, 2016[41]).

In particular, a key aspect of successful stakeholder engagement is the establishment of clear objectives for the process in consultation with stakeholders themselves, i.e. defining the engagement's expectations.

Public officials considering establishing a mechanism to consult or engage stakeholders at the international level, should first consider some preliminary strategic elements. They should agree on what type of inputs, comments or feedback they seek from stakeholders, how and at which moment they are willing to engage them, on what topics, documents or decisions and – crucially – what they intend to do with stakeholders' contributions. This paper will provide practical suggestions and recommendations on maximising stakeholder engagement, touching upon all of the above-mentioned points. However, a key precondition is clarifying and agreeing on these expectations with the stakeholders. This includes clear expectations for its calendar, contents, working methods and format, as well as how the inputs will be used and the follow-up. These aspects should be included in either the text of the instrument or its rules of procedure. Clarifying the topics and documents subject to consultation, what type of inputs are expected from participants and how they will be used can avoid stakeholders' frustration and consultation fatigue, resulting in more targeted, useful inputs.

A stakeholder engagement process at the international level should only be conceived and launched if the international entity is willing to:

- Genuinely consider (which, of course, does not necessarily mean agree or adopt) the inputs and feedback provided by stakeholders, including when critical, and be open to stakeholders potentially influencing decision making.
- Provide space for stakeholders to express their views, ideally even support them in doing so.
- Allocate sufficient time, as well as human, technical and financial resources, to the engagement process.

In addition, stakeholders will engage only if the engagement is worth their time, energy and expertise. This means that they will expect some feedback on how their inputs or comments have been used, but they will also need to see that what they are consulted on is meaningful for their work or their lives. In other words, if an international process is not considered relevant by stakeholders, either because it has no real power or does not have a concrete impact or is perceived as too far from their concern, then CSOs and other groups will be less likely to engage than if they perceive the international process has a real impact on their everyday life or work.

Ensuring high-level commitment to engagement

Commitment by senior leadership is another key condition for the success of any stakeholder engagement mechanism. At the international level, this might be complex given the nature of international organisations, alliances and partnerships where several countries get together or where the structure includes both officials of the organisation (or secretariat) and country representatives.

Such commitment can be formally expressed in the founding document of the international organisation or entity. However, the authorities' leadership should be sustained over time and their willingness to take a participatory approach should be communicated to stakeholders and the public. A shared vision of the importance of multi-stakeholder implementation should be actively embraced by the relevant authorities at all levels, from the highest level of leadership to the implementing teams, committing to a broader culture of open government that promotes the principles of transparency, integrity and accountability.

Besides being enshrined in the founding document of an international organisation or entity, high-level commitment to meaningful engagement could be signalled by formally approving the text regulating the stakeholder engagement process or instrument, whether as an annex to the founding document or as a standalone document. Communicating such commitment in leaders' official speeches and remarks during key meetings will be equally important.

An additional relevant dimension of the high-level commitment, as highlighted by Principle 3 for stakeholder engagement in the OECD Compendium of International Organisations' Practices, would be to begin the process for stakeholder participation at the outset of the policy or decision-making cycle and provide possibilities to contribute to agenda setting, as highlighted later in this document (OECD, 2021[34]). This will send a strong message to stakeholders that the process is genuinely participatory and the provision of meaningful input is still possible. In this sense, interviews conducted with civil society have emphasised that a clear commitment from the authorities will strengthen stakeholders' incentives to engage meaningfully with the mechanism.

Institutionalisation of stakeholder engagement

An analysis of existing comparative experiences suggests that there are benefits to the institutionalisation of an engagement mechanism. Institutionalisation aims to establish stakeholder participation as the norm in a given international organisation or entity, moving away from ad hoc and one-off consultation that

largely depends on the public authorities' will. Engagement would then be an obligation and a systematic requirement for an international organisation or entity embedded in its legal and institutional framework.

Institutionalisation can be achieved by including structured participation measures in the international entities' official documents or rules of procedure and/or by creating a specific permanent body or structure. Creating a unit in the secretariat of an international organisation in charge of stakeholder engagement, with dedicated, specialised staff, can also contribute to institutionalisation. Finally, stakeholder participation can also be institutionalised through practice and fostering a culture of engagement among international officials.

Box 2.1 provides some examples of formalised mechanisms for global stakeholder participation.

Box 2.1. Formalised mechanisms for global stakeholder participation through legal documents

The Organisation of American States (OAS)

The OAS adopted the *Guidelines for the Participation of Civil Society Organizations in OAS Activities* in 1999, providing a formal framework for the participation of CSOs in some of its bodies and conferences (Resolution CP/RES. 759). The guidelines outline the scope and principles of civil society participation in the OAS, as well as the responsibilities of the organs, agencies and entities of the OAS with respect to participation by civil society in their activities.

In particular, the guidelines mandate the Committee on Inter-American Summits Management and Civil Society Participation in OAS Activities (CISC), a body composed of permanent representatives of the member states subsidiary to the OAS Permanent Council, to implement the guidelines of the 1999 resolution. They also mandate the committee: to design, implement and evaluate the necessary strategies to increase and facilitate civil society participation; to promote enhanced co-operation of OAS bodies with civil society; to study matters relating to civil society participation in OAS activities, including transmitting to the Permanent Council new applications from CSOs to register; and to make recommendations to the Permanent Council in this area.

The *Framework for Dialogue between the DAC and Civil Society Organisations*

Informal engagement that had taken place previously for many years between CSOs and the OECD DAC was institutionalised through a *Framework for Dialogue between the DAC and Civil Society Organisations* (2023[42]). Approved by the DAC in 2018, the framework establishes a structure for the dialogue based on joint principles, such as sharing responsibility between both the DAC and CSOs, being forward-looking to influence and be influenced, providing space for consultation with CSOs before key decisions are made and making pertinent information available in a timely manner. It also establishes minimum commitments, including an annual DAC-CSO dialogue on key issues of mutual interest, consultations with CSO representatives prior to the DAC high-level and senior-level meetings and participation in those meetings as observers, and relevant thematic discussions. In line with the principle of self-organisation, CSOs' engagement with the DAC under the framework is facilitated and co-ordinated by the DAC-CSO Reference Group, a self-governing CSO platform (see Box 2.2).

Sources: OAS (2022[43]), *Relations with Civil Society Organizations*, https://www.oas.org/en/ser/dia/civil_society/index.shtml; OECD (2023[42]), *Framework for Dialogue between the DAC and Civil Society Organisations*, https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD/DAC(2018)28/en/pdf; OECD (2021[44]), DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance, https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-5021; OECD (n.d.[45]), *DAC-CSO Reference Group Terms of Reference*, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OgOzuis6U27fotcpsPs16HELBgUXus3s/view.

Stakeholders also usually underscore the importance of moving away from ad hoc consultations, often on the occasion of high-level meetings and summits, to embrace stable and predictable engagement on a rolling basis so that participation becomes a habit and can influence the entire policy-making and decision-making processes. Box 2.2 provides examples of stakeholder engagement mechanisms institutionalised through the creation of advisory bodies.

Box 2.2. Institutionalised mechanisms for stakeholder engagement through the creation of advisory bodies

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

The EESC is a consultative EU body established in 1958. It is an advisory assembly composed of social partners and representatives of various interests.

The EESC has 329 members from all EU member states appointed for a renewable 5-year term. Members are nominated by national governments and appointed by the Council of the European Union. They are independent and perform their duties in the interest of all EU citizens. The number of members per country is correlated to the country's population. The members work in three groups, representing employers (Group I), workers (Group II) and CSOs (made up of "other representatives and stakeholders of civil society, particularly in the economic, civic, professional and cultural field" – Group III). Each group has its own secretariat. EESC members themselves choose which group they wish to join.

The African Union (AU) Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC)

The AU ECOSOCC was established in July 2004 as an advisory organ composed of different social and professional groups of AU member states.

The purpose of ECOSOCC is to provide an opportunity for African CSOs to play an active role in contributing to AU principles, policies and programmes. ECOSOCC is composed of 2 CSOs from each member state, 10 CSOs operating at the regional level and 8 at the continental level, 20 CSOs from the African diaspora, as defined by the Executive Council and covering the continents of the world and 6 CSOs, in *ex officio* capacity, nominated by the AU Commission and based on special considerations, in consultation with member states.

The ECOSOCC statute also provides for member state, regional, continental and diaspora representatives to be elected on the basis of 50% gender equality and 50% aged between 18 and 35.

Sources: EESC (2024[46]), *Homepage*, https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en accessed on 27 November 2024; AU (2024[47]), *ECOSOCC*, https://au.int/en/about/ecosocc accessed on 27 November 2024; https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/sections-other-bodies/other/eu-acp-follow-committee

Identifying synergies with relevant existing initiatives

When planning a stakeholder engagement process or mechanism at the international level, public officials might want to investigate whether similar initiatives are already in place in their field of intervention or geographical scope. Indeed, while an international organisation or the promoters of a global partnership would probably need a mechanism that fits their structures and thematic priorities, they should also consider the benefit of avoiding duplication of efforts and hence could seek synergies with existing institutional and civil society processes. For this purpose, an initial mapping could be conducted detailing the existing related mechanisms and contacts could be established with them to promote collaboration in stakeholder participation if and when there is an overlap in the topics addressed.

Establishing such synergy, where possible and appropriate, especially when it comes to requesting CSOs' inputs, would also avoid overburdening stakeholders, which could lead to "consultation fatigue" if they were requested for the same inputs multiple times by different organisations.

Who to engage? Designing sound stakeholder selection

The effective identification and selection of stakeholders is key for meaningful participation at the international level, in line with Principle 2 for stakeholder engagement of the OECD Compendium for International Organisations' Practices (2021[34]). For CSOs interviewed, self-selection of participating organisations tends to be the preferred selection process, as it can enhance the legitimacy and independence of the engagement. At the same time, self-selection should be regulated by clear and transparent criteria.

Among selection methods, the most commonly used by existing mechanisms at the international level include an application or registration process to the Secretariat or co-ordinating committee of the mechanism open to organisations working broadly on one or several of the topics covered by the organisation or partnership. Ensuring self-selection means that the mechanism can autonomously incorporate its members without influence from the international institution to which it channels its inputs. For example, the International Steering Committee (ISC) of the Community of Democracies Governing Council is an independent, representative body elected by a civil society assembly to advise the Community of Democracies. The ISC comprises 26 CSOs, including global-, regional- and national-level organisations, which self-select without any influence from the Community of Democracies Secretariat or country delegates. Similarly, the OECD DAC Reference Group (see Box 3.1 for details on its mandate and structure) functions completely autonomously from the OECD DAC. Neither the OECD Secretariat nor the DAC delegates influence the selection of the members of the group, the co-chairs, the Thematic Working Group leads, nor members of the Core Group. The Secretariat is based in an independent civil society organisation, the Reality of Aid Network, which supports the member application and selection process.

The application process should be clearly defined and can be publicised through an open call that is widely disseminated, especially among underrepresented groups (see section in Chapter 3 on fostering inclusiveness in participation). Further, the application procedure should not be too burdensome to ensure stakeholders with limited capacities are not discouraged from applying. CSOs could decide how to arrange the specific mechanism and select their own spokespeople. Box 2.3 provides examples of selection criteria used by different international entities.

Box 2.3. Examples of stakeholder selection criteria

Criteria to obtain participatory status at the Council of Europe

Participatory status may be granted to international NGOs:

- Which respect and defend the values and principles of the Council of Europe.
- Which are able, through their work, to support the achievement of closer unity mentioned in Article 1 of the Council of Europe's statute.
- Which are created based on a constitutive act adopted according to democratic principles, which have a democratic structure and governance.
- Which are particularly representative in the field(s) of their competency and the fields of action shared by the Council of Europe.

- Which are represented at the European level and which have members in at least five member states of the Council of Europe.
- Which were created and have implemented activities at least two years before the moment of applying for participatory status.
- Which already have working relations with the Council of Europe.
- Which can contribute to and participate actively in Council of Europe deliberations and activities.
- Which can make known the work of the Council of Europe to society.

The Majalat project

The Majalat project aimed to promote exchanges, dialogues and co-operation between CSOs on both sides of the Mediterranean and the institutions of the European Union. The project, funded by the European Union, was initiated by a consortium of six CSO platforms: the Arab NGO Network for Development, the Arab Trade Union Confederation, the Morocco Alternatives Forum, the EuroMed Rights network, the EuroMed France network and the European network SOLIDAR.

The project intended to be a mechanism built by CSOs for CSOs. Eligible organisations willing to participate in the structured dialogue had to comply with the following criteria:

- Adhere to the international values of human rights in their universality, indivisibility and interdependence, as well as international humanitarian law.
- Be recognised as independent of governmental authorities and political parties.
- Be NGOs (registered or not) or civil society networks.
- Demonstrate their capacity to organise and support activities with a regional scope.
- Have at least two years of experience in the relevant activities.

Criteria to be accredited as an NGO in the United Nations Economic and Social Council

United Nations Economic and Social Council Resolution no. 31/1996 foresees the following criteria to grant consultative status to NGOs:

- The organisation shall be recognised for its competency or representative character within a particular field.
- The organisation shall have an established headquarters with an executive officer. It shall have a democratically adopted constitution, a copy of which shall be deposited with the Secretary-General of the United Nations. It shall provide for policy determination by a conference, congress or other representative body as well as an executive organ responsible for the policy-making body.
- The organisation shall be able to speak for its members through its authorised representatives. Evidence of this authority shall be presented if requested.
- The organisation shall have a representative structure and possess appropriate accountability mechanisms for its members, who shall exercise effective control over its policies and actions by exercising voting rights or other appropriate democratic and transparent decision-making processes. Any such organisation not established by a governmental entity or intergovernmental agreement shall be considered a non-governmental organisation for the purpose of these arrangements, including organisations that accept members designated by governmental authorities, provided that such membership does not interfere with the free expression of views of the organisation.

- The basic resources of the organisation shall be derived mainly from contributions of the national affiliates or other components or from individual members. Where voluntary contributions have been received, their amounts and donors shall be faithfully revealed to the Committee on Non-Governmental Organisations. Where, however, the above criterion is not fulfilled and an organisation is financed from other sources, it must explain to the satisfaction of the committee its reasons for not meeting the requirements laid down in this paragraph. Any financial contribution or other support, direct or indirect, from a government to the organisation shall be openly declared to the committee through the secretary-general and fully recorded in the financial and other records of the organisation. It shall be devoted to purposes in accordance with the aims of the United Nations.

Criteria to become members of the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE)

CPDE by-laws foresee that the CPDE is open to all CSOs that are:

- Regional platforms representing national CSO platforms engaged in development effectiveness.
- Sectors/major groups representing worldwide, membership-based constituencies that have a pivotal role in their sector or major groups on issues related to development effectiveness.
- Local and national CSOs and regional platforms.

Membership is also determined by the following special criteria:

- Adherence to the Istanbul Principles, the International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness and the CSO Key Asks. Such criteria undergo the screening of the constituency itself and are facilitated by the focal person(s) before endorsement by the CPDE Global Secretariat.
- Promotion of gender equity, with an existing policy related to this.

Sources: Council of Europe (2022[48]), *Working with the Council of Europe: A Practical Guide for Civil Society*, https://rm.coe.int/work-with-coe-guide-english-2022/1680a66592; Majalat (n.d.[49]), *About Us*, https://www.majalat.org/about-us; Majalat (n.d.[50]), *Organisation*, https://www.majalat.org/user/register/organisation; UNOV (1996[51]), *Resolution 1996/31*, https://www.unov.org/documents/NGO/NGO_Resolution_1996_31.pdf; CPDE (2020[52]), https://docs.google.com/document/d/1n3B2j1a65qPmRvxUd9vf8acVwJxN1pPZ/edit.

A key issue when it comes to selection criteria is how to balance the continuity of membership, which is helpful for the stability of the mechanism and institutional memory, with the renewal of members to prevent stakeholders from becoming too personally involved or embedded in the mechanism and to bring in fresh perspectives and expertise. Hence, an engagement mechanism should remain flexible to enable new organisations to join on a rolling or rotational basis as they become aware, interested or have a stake in a new topic being considered. Stakeholders interviewed for this paper have underlined that one year is a short period to engage and two years may be an adequate period before rotation takes place, particularly for membership in particular organs of the mechanism. Partial rotation of some members can be a good option to strike a balance between both needs. This is the case, for example, for the Eastern Partnership CSO Forum (see Boxes 3.2 and 3.8).

Conducting a stakeholder mapping and compiling a list of CSOs and other groups relevant to a certain international organisation or alliance could help inform the inclusive selection of stakeholders. In addition, as international entities often involve a large number of countries and a wide range of diverse stakeholders in each country, it might be useful to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to selecting stakeholders, tailoring some of the selection criteria to country contexts.

It is also recommended that CSOs and other groups rely on existing global, regional and national platforms to facilitate the identification of and outreach to stakeholders, particularly those active in the thematic issues and the regions covered by a given international organisation.

Selection of individual citizens

For those international organisations and entities willing to engage individual citizens, perhaps as complementary to engaging stakeholders, a civic lottery (random sampling from which a representative selection is made to ensure that the group broadly matches the demographic profile of the community) could be used to select a representative group of people and organisations; given the large territory covered by many international organisations and processes, this would be challenging. However, some examples do exist. Box 2.4 presents some good practice examples of individual citizen selection and engagement at the supranational level.

Box 2.4. Examples of supranational citizen selection and engagement

Conference on the Future of Europe

During the Conference on the Future of Europe (for more information, see Box 3.6), multiple methods were used to select participating citizens:

- **A digital platform**: Any European citizen could access the platform (through registration by email and password) and propose an idea or comment on an idea already proposed in one of the ten main themes.
- **European Citizens' Panels**: Four thematic panels of 200 citizens randomly selected with rules for weighting representation:
  - At least one man and one woman from each member state on each panel.
  - Representativeness of European diversity (geographical situation, gender, age, socio-cultural background, level of education).
  - One-third of the participants in each panel had to be between 16 and 25 years old.
- **National panels and events**: Each country was free in terms of whether and how it organised national events. Principles were set out for the organisation of national citizens' panels and six countries successfully organised panels in accordance with these principles (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania and the Netherlands).
- **A conference plenary**: Made up of 108 citizens (out of 449 participants) as follows:
  - Twenty citizens from each of the 4 European Citizens' Panels.
  - The president of the European Youth Forum.
  - One citizen per member state from national panels or events.

The Global Assembly

The way participants were chosen for the Global Assembly (see Box 1.2 for details on its origins and mandate) was as follows:

- **The Core Assembly**: Its objective was to learn about and discuss the climate and ecological crisis and to present proposals at COP26. An initial lottery was held to determine 100 locations around the world. Community organisations were then recruited as close as possible to these 100 locations. These local organisations recruited between 4 and 6 individuals to represent the

diversity of their community. A second balanced draw selected 100 individuals from the 675 recruited. These 100 individuals constitute the Core Assembly.

- **Community assemblies**: The objective of community assemblies was to bring people together locally with a common goal: to inform themselves and propose a response to the Global Assembly framing question. Anyone could run a community assembly to submit outcomes and proposals. This assembly had to be registered on the Global Assembly platform. A step-by-step toolkit and learning resources were available to assist in running these assemblies.
- **A Knowledge and Wisdom Committee**: Eight individuals from CSOs and the academic world, whose goal was to determine the framing question as well as to ensure that the Global Assembly's learning phase is grounded in evidence. The committee also created an information booklet, a wiki and a stakeholder video library to provide evidence-based information to the assemblies.

Sources: EC (2024[53]), *Conference on the Future of Europe*, European Commission, https://futureu.europa.eu/ accessed on 27 November 2024; Global Assembly (2024[54]), *Homepage*, https://globalassembly.org/ accessed on 27 November 2024.

The establishment of constituencies or quotas

When conceiving and implementing a stakeholder engagement mechanism at the international level, efforts should be made to reach groups of people and organisations that tend to be underrepresented or vulnerable and often struggle to make their voice heard or engage at global and regional levels, such as youth, women, migrants, people with disabilities, people living in rural or remote areas, Indigenous populations and minorities. Balanced participation should be sought regarding geographical origin, age, gender and other characteristics.

Establishing categories of stakeholders to be involved, as part of groups/constituencies, could be relevant to ensure diversity beyond the largest global NGO networks and other large stakeholders, which otherwise might end up dominating the engagement mechanism because of their size, expertise, resources and global reach. While the exact categories and constituencies will depend on the nature of the international organisation or entity seeking to engage them, examples of stakeholders could include women, youth, farmers, trade unions, Indigenous peoples, faith-based organisations, consumers, NGOs, co-operatives, producers, etc. Box 2.5 provides examples of engagement processes that have used such categorisation to foster the inclusiveness of different groups. The majority of actors interviewed expressed support for establishing quotas as necessary, especially in co-ordinating or steering engagement mechanism bodies.

In addition, all efforts towards stakeholder participation should take into account the specific characteristics of stakeholders in different countries and regions covered by the international organisation or entity. For instance, some countries' stakeholders might be mostly informal groups, while the wide geographical dimension of some territories or limited infrastructure can create difficulties for the operation of stakeholders. To the extent possible, potential barriers to participation specific to certain regions and countries should be duly identified and addressed.

Box 2.5. Examples of the participation of underrepresented stakeholder groups

United Nations major groups and other stakeholders

Since the first United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, also known as the Earth Summit, it has been recognised that achieving sustainable development would require the active participation of all sectors of society. Agenda 21, adopted at the Earth Summit, formalised

nine sectors of society as the main channels through which broad participation would be facilitated in UN activities related to sustainable development. They are officially referred to as “major groups” and include:

- women
- children and youth
- Indigenous peoples
- NGOs
- local authorities
- workers and trade unions
- business and industry
- the scientific and technological community
- farmers.

The outcome document of the Conference on Sustainable Development, *The Future We Want*, highlighted major groups’ role in pursuing sustainable societies for future generations. Through *The Future We Want* and the establishment of the United Nations High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2013 (RES/67/290), other relevant stakeholders were invited to participate in UN processes related to sustainable development. They currently include:

- local communities
- educational and academic entities
- faith groups
- foundations and private philanthropic organisations
- migrants
- older persons
- parliamentary networks and associations
- persons with disabilities
- volunteer groups.

The Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples’ Mechanism (CSIPM) of the UN Committee on World Food Security

The CSIPM is organised around 11 global constituencies or groups to prioritise the organisations and movements of the people most affected by food insecurity and malnutrition. They bring together networks of:

- smallholder farmers
- pastoralists
- fisherfolk
- Indigenous peoples
- agricultural and food workers
- the landless
- women
- youth
- consumers
- the urban food insecure
- NGOs.

All CSIPM members self-categorise themselves as 1 or more of the 11 categories upon becoming members.

CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) constituencies

The CPDE is composed of constituencies, called "sectors", which include:

- rural development
- feminist groups
- Indigenous peoples
- international CSOs
- labour organisations
- migrants and diaspora
- youth organisations.

Sources: UN DESA/UNITAR (2020[55]), *Stakeholder Engagement and the 2030 Agenda: A Practical Guide*, https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Stakeholder%20Engagement%20and%20the%202030%20Agenda%20-%20A%20practical%20guide%20English.pdf; CSIPM (n.d.[56]), *What is the CSIPM?*, https://www.csm4cfs.org/what-is-the-csm/; CPDE (n.d.[57]), *Regional and Sectoral Coordinating Units*, https://csopartnership.org/structure-and-governance/regional-and-sectoral-coordinating-units/.

Summary of key recommendations

- Ensure adequate legal and institutional frameworks are put in place to enable long-term, sustained stakeholder engagement.
- Protect and promote a healthy civic space to enable meaningful stakeholder development, including the protection of activists, CSOs and human rights defenders who may take risks by participating in international fora.
- Clarify the strategic objectives and expectations of participation at the early stages of the engagement process.
- Ensure high-level commitment to a common vision and purpose for stakeholder engagement.
- Identify and build synergies with existing processes and structures.
- Institutionalise the engagement mechanism through the establishment of a formal, permanent body or structure and making engagement a systematic requirement.
- Foster a culture of engagement among international officials.
- Engage a combination of CSOs and individuals, building on existing stakeholder mappings. CSOs should self-select based on clear and transparent criteria, while individuals could be chosen through a civic lottery.
- Establish categories or constituencies of stakeholders to promote diversity, ensuring underrepresented groups are included.
- Consider complementing traditional consultation mechanisms with more ambitious and innovative forms of engagement, such as co-creation, modern information technology tools and deliberative processes.

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3 Governing inclusive and transparent international civil society engagement

This chapter delves into the critical aspects of governing inclusive and transparent engagement at the international level in practice. It begins by exploring the facilitation and governance structures necessary to support meaningful participation, highlighting the roles of key organs and support systems. The chapter then addresses the importance of both geographical and thematic co-ordination to ensure diverse and representative input. Attention is also given to the design of effective online and offline participation tools, along with strategies for clear and consistent communication about the process. Sustainable funding models are examined as a cornerstone for maintaining long-term engagement efforts and enabling the creation of governance structures and tools. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the need for capacity-building initiatives and other methods to ensure inclusiveness and empower participants. Following this, the chapter emphasises the importance of feedback mechanisms and the continuous improvement of the participation process through monitoring and impact evaluation. Finally, it underscores the importance of committing to the principles of ethics and transparency throughout all stages of engagement.

Facilitation and governance of the participation process: Organs and support structure

The creation of adequate support structures emerged in analysing comparative experiences and practices as a crucial aspect to ensure sustained engagement. Clarity in line management and responsibilities between the different bodies are key success factors.

The combination of organs suitable for each context will depend on the desired degree of institutionalisation of the engagement, as well as on the geographical scope covered and the complexity of the matters at hand. Similarly, the size and weight of support structures should match the desired ambition and scope of the targeted engagement, as they can be resource-intensive and require dedicated staff to be managed effectively. Some mechanisms may benefit from being more lightweight, while others dealing with complex topics and many stakeholders will require a larger structure. Finally, the model of engagement chosen (see Table 1.1) may have a certain impact on the necessary support structures. This section outlines examples of organs that exist across a variety of international stakeholder engagement mechanisms.

General assembly

A general assembly of members can serve as a key forum where all participating stakeholders convene to discuss, deliberate and make strategic decisions on the overall direction of the participatory initiative. It provides a platform for stakeholders to voice their perspectives, share insights and contribute to formulating strategies, policies and action plans. The general assembly plays a crucial role in fostering transparency,

inclusivity and ownership among stakeholders, ensuring that diverse voices are heard and taken into account within the participation mechanism. In the mechanisms studied, general assemblies typically meet on an annual or biennial basis to review progress, set priorities, approve budgets and elect leadership/co-ordination positions. For example, the General Assembly of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum meets annually to discuss strategic priorities and debate the achievements of the mechanism. However, not all mechanisms have general assemblies, especially in cases where the membership is too large to come together. In those cases, co-ordination and dialogue are carried out through the representatives or spokespeople of constituencies, regions or thematic experts, as appropriate.

Governance body

A governance body or steering/co-ordinating committee is a small organ that can make day-to-day governance decisions and appointments and oversee the Secretariat's work, similar to an executive board in other organisations. It can be composed of members of active civil society organisations (CSOs) or engaged individuals. Selection procedures for the co-ordinating body should be established by stakeholders themselves, be accessible and transparent and provide sufficient time for applications. The body should at the very least aim for geographic, age and gender balance. It should also consider a periodical, partial rotation of its members to avoid entrenchment dynamics while retaining institutional memory.

The members of the governance body do not necessarily act as membership representatives but rather as spokespeople: they should transmit the messages gathered from the full membership and ensure dissenting opinions are published. For example, the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) has a co-ordinating committee responsible for preparing global assembly meetings and following up its decisions, supervising the Secretariat and budgetary and financial aspects, facilitating policy development and co-ordinating thematic working groups. It is composed of 24 elected members of the Global Assembly representing the geographical areas and sectors of activity as well as the co-chairs. The number of representatives from each group varies according to the number of CSOs in the group.

Secretariat

Establishing a Secretariat can be important for facilitating stakeholder engagement, depending on the degree of complexity. In most cases studied, the Secretariat includes a leading co-ordinator to which the rest of staff reports. The recruitment process should recognise the expertise required to co-ordinate an international engagement process. The Secretariat co-ordinator may report to the governance body (see above). Importantly, the host of the Secretariat, whether it is a stakeholder, a consortium of stakeholders or an external third party, should be neutral and seen as legitimate with regard to stakeholders. If hosted by an individual CSO, it may benefit from being rotational, i.e. hosted in different organisations every few years, based in different regions, to avoid entrenchment dynamics. Third-party hosting could be considered, provided the entity has the required expertise and is seen as legitimate by civil society. Each option has strengths and weaknesses: while having the Secretariat hosted by a particular organisation might potentially lead to entrenchment dynamics and be perceived as unfair, the rotation of the Secretariat between organisations can result in certain difficulties, including a loss of institutional memory.

The role of the Secretariat may include co-ordination and support to governance, communication, events support, finance and resource management, general administration, management of the online platform and/or website, and policy advice. For example, the Secretariat of the United Nations Committee on World Food Security (CFS) Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples'' Mechanism (CSIPM) guarantees the mechanism's daily functioning. It offers technical support to the work of the co-ordinating committee and working groups by facilitating the communication flow, ensuring the effective co-ordination of all bodies, promoting respect for the mechanism's organising principles and internal functioning guidelines, and

administrating the financial resources and logistics arrangements. It is hosted by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Secretariat in Rome and is composed of four supporting staff members: a co-ordinator, a financial/administrative officer, a programme officer and a communications officer. A professional and long-term collaborating team of interpreters and translators also supports the daily work of the Secretariat by enabling the translation of all CFS documents and mechanism messages and the interpretation of all meetings in English, French and Spanish. The Secretariat reports directly to the co-ordinating committee.

Thematic working groups

Comparative examples have shown the importance of creating thematic working groups of stakeholders to hold substantive policy discussions. They may take the form of voluntary groups to discuss specific topics, as present in many engagement mechanisms and they can benefit from expert or volunteer facilitators. Box 3.1 provides an example of the support structure of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC)-CSO Reference Group.

Box 3.1. Examples of supporting structures

OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC)-CSO Reference Group

The DAC-CSO Reference Group is a self-governing CSO platform envisioned to help co-ordinate CSOs' advocacy towards OECD DAC and ensure broad participation by reaching out to CSOs that had not previously engaged with DAC, especially from the Global South. The following bodies support the group's governance and facilitation activities:

1. The **Core Group** is the intermediary decision-making body of the DAC-CSO Reference Group. In between Strategy Meetings (i.e. plenary meetings of all Reference Group members), the Core Group provides leadership and guidance. It also ensures that the Secretariat implements the overall political direction of the Reference Group. It is the equivalent of an executive board or steering committee in other mechanisms.
2. The **Secretariat** is a single unit that co-ordinates the Reference Group.
3. Self-organised **thematic working groups** join forces on key areas of interest. The groups are a space for information sharing, strategising and co-ordinating in joint advocacy.

Further, the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance adopted in 2021 [OECD/LEGAL/5021] (OECD, 2021[58]) mentions that "Collaboration with the DAC-CSO Reference Group will support [the Recommendation's] dissemination to and through CSOs around the globe" and the development of toolkits to support implementation, both in collaboration with the DAC Community of Practice on Civil Society.[4]

The Civil 20 (C20) of the Group of 20 (G20)

The C20 was made official as a G20 engagement group in 2013. As part of the G20 process, C20 aims to play multiple roles, including but not limited to providing expertise and holding governments accountable to their commitments, seeking positive outcomes for society as a whole and pushing for effective financial means and allocation of resources to achieve those outcomes.

To ensure participation, transparency and continuity, C20 work is driven by a governance structured as follows:

- **The C20 Troika**: The Troika structure allows for dialogue and co-ordination between the leading CSOs from the current, previous and following G20/C20 host countries.

- **The C20 chair and co-chairs**: Responsible for facilitating the C20 process, representing the C20, structuring the Secretariat, choosing the C20 sherpa, making pronouncements and dialogue with other actors involved in the G20.
- **The C20 sherpa**: Chosen each year by the chair and co-chair, the C20 sherpa is the main point of contact with external stakeholders (G20 representatives, international organisations, media and other G20 engagement groups). Together with the chair, the sherpa is also responsible for ensuring a fluent and effective dialogue among C20 working group chairs, mainstreaming relevant areas of work and developing the C20 schedule, for approval by the steering committee and the International Advisory Committee (IAC).
- **The C20 Secretariat**: Responsible for administrative, financial and logistical co-ordination tasks.
- **The International Advisory Committee (IAC)**: Composed of international CSO representatives with experience working within the G20, the IAC's main roles are advising the chair, the sherpa and the Steering Committee on strategic decision making and contributing to disseminating C20 recommendations among key stakeholders.
- **The C20 Steering Committee (SC)**: The executive body is responsible for ensuring that the C20 is an open and diverse space that facilitates a broad range of civil society views of the G20. It leads the production of recommendations, ensures C20 working groups meet regularly among themselves and with government representatives and helps co-ordinate the agendas for C20 meetings. The SC works alongside and is advised by the IAC.

The SC and IAC are composed of CSOs with expertise in various areas of C20 engagement, invited by the chair and co-chair based on two major criteria: experience of working at C20/G20 level and geographic and thematic representation. It must consider regional and gender balance, with attention given to the representation of marginalised and underrepresented groups.

To ensure continuity in the IAC and SC, at least two members in each body should stay on from the previous cycle. At the same time, the principle of rotation should be applied to both the SC and IAC, with members serving beyond three consecutive years only in exceptional circumstances. Communication must be fluid between co-chairs, the sherpa, SC and IAC for decision-making on strategic and key issues.

Sources: DAC-CSO Reference Group (2024[59]), *Structures and Governance*, https://www.dac-csoreferencegroup.com/governance; OECD (2021[58]), *DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance*, https://21a29bf8-528b-4043-b9dc-caa23e5a1907.usrfiles.com/ugd/21a29b_28465aa1649c4f35aa726fa18146e7d4.pdf; G20 (2024[60]), *About C20 – C20 Brazil*, About C20 – C20 Brazil

Geographical and thematic co-ordination

Given the nature of engagement at the international level, a fundamental challenge in practice is to achieve co-ordination across organisations in broad geographical areas. Depending on how large the geographical scope of the mechanism is, it can be helpful to subdivide stakeholders into regions and sub-regions or per country and establish group co-ordinators who can gather inputs from that particular area. In general terms, stakeholders should be engaged at different key levels through specific mechanisms and approaches: local, national, regional and global (if the engagement process covers different regions of the world). Engagement at the national level is powerful in feeding international dialogues and is key to building and facilitating strategic links between the local/grassroots and regional levels.

In order to facilitate engagement at the regional and national levels, organisations representing the main stakeholders, such as regional or national civil society platforms or networks – where they exist and are seen as legitimate – may play a key facilitation role.

At the same time, it is relevant for stakeholders from all areas to come together in relation to thematic priorities. To accomplish this, thematic co-ordination through establishing thematic working groups (as mentioned above) can help by bringing together a cross-cutting group of stakeholders with particular expertise or interest in one of the topics covered by the participation initiative. Box 3.2 provides some examples of global stakeholder participation co-ordination mechanisms.

Box 3.2. Examples of co-ordination in global stakeholder engagement

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) West African Civil Society Forum

ECOWAS is an international organisation grouping West African countries. Within its framework, ECOWAS regularly involves civil society and, in 2003, took the step to institutionalise relations with CSOs by creating the West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOF). This platform co-ordinates the actions of CSOs and acts as a catalyst for relations between CSOs and ECOWAS.

The work of WACSOF CSOs is organised according to a double geographical and thematic division. At the geographical level, each of the 15 member countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo) set up a national platform at the creation of WACSOF. Each platform is responsible for co-ordinating the work of the CSOs in the country and for linking with other countries within the different themes, providing the national level with a strong role in the co-ordination of inputs. A co-ordinator elected by WACSOF members represents each of the national platforms. At the thematic level, WACSOF focuses on 18 thematic areas that support local, national or regional projects, which work through thematic groups.

Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

The Eastern Partnership is a policy initiative involving the European Union, its member states, and six Eastern European partner countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine). The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), established in 2009, aims to ensure the effective participation of civil society of both the European Union and the six countries in the process of planning, monitoring and implementing the EaP policy in constructive dialogue with the European Union and EaP decision makers. It counts on a rich and diverse membership and is currently the largest umbrella organisation of CSOs from the European Union and EaP region.

The forum has a multi-layered governance structure. Its governance bodies are the General Assembly, the Steering Committee, the Compliance Committee and five working groups – all made up of biennially selected CSOs called "delegates". The EaP CSF Secretariat is based in Brussels, Belgium. It fulfils the role of co-ordinating and executive institution, facilitating the interaction and dialogue between the forum and the European stakeholders through advocacy and policy work. The forum's mission on the ground is implemented by the six national platforms established in each EaP country. Their governance structure reflects, at the local level, the one of the forum.

CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE)

CPDE member organisations are divided by continent and have regional and sub-regional Secretariats. The regional co-ordinating units convene existing sub-regional platforms, development CSOs and sectoral networks/groups within the region to develop and implement a collective advocacy, outreach and capacity development work plan. The regional focal person and its representative(s) to the general assembly are selected through regional co-ordination committees. Sectors also maintain co-ordinating units facilitated by a global representative and composed of regional representatives.

Sources: ECOWAS (ECOWAS CEDEAO, 2024[3]), https://ecowas.int/?page_id=40 accessed on 27 November 2024; ECOWAS, for more information on the Civil Society Forum: WACSOF (2024[3]), *Environment and Climate Change*, https://wacsof-foscao.org/index.php/en/ accessed on 27 November 2024; for more information on the EaP Civil Society Forum: EaP-CSF (2024[4]), *EaP CSF Civil Society Summit*, https://eap-csf.eu/ accessed on 27 November 2024; CPDE (2024[5]), *Regions*, https://csopartnership.org/our-constituencies/regions/ accessed on 27 November 2024.

Sustainable funding

Funding of international stakeholder engagement mechanisms or initiatives should be stable, predictable, independent and institutionalised to enable smooth operations. The mechanisms studied for this paper have budgets ranging from around EUR 100 000 to EUR 1.5 million annually. Funding has at least two distinct objectives: ensuring adequate resources for the facilitation, governance and monitoring of the process and ensuring the capacity of each stakeholder to engage in the process in accordance with the expected and agreed inputs and outputs. As much as possible, funding should be multiannual and the overall engagement mechanism should be funded (core funding) to ensure continuity and reduce transaction costs, as opposed to project-based or short-term funding. In order to foster ownership, mechanisms should be co-funded by the authorities, which will benefit from stakeholder inputs in a manner proportionate to their possibilities. Funds should be handled by the mechanism's organs designated to do so and not by international entities themselves to ensure independence. If multiple donors contribute to the same mechanism, options such as basket funds and pooled funding should be explored.

While taking into account the mechanism's degree of complexity and formality, funding should at least cover Secretariat staff salaries, meeting organisation/logistics costs (including the translation of key documents and interpretation during key meetings), the development of any websites or online tools, capacity-building activities for stakeholders if any and the chosen monitoring/evaluation and accountability mechanisms. Further, it could also include funds to support policy research, advocacy efforts and outreach: this could help stakeholders acquire solid evidence and data to inform their inputs, which in turn would be sound, evidence-based and hence more relevant to the authorities.

During stakeholder interviews, practical and logistical support tools were highlighted as important to ensure CSOs could participate effectively, particularly those affected by different barriers such as low-income countries/backgrounds, rural constituencies, remote locations, lack of Internet access, etc. Funding for travel to in-person consultation events (balancing cost-effectiveness and environmental considerations) and visa facilitation are also considered key measures to reduce participation barriers for those who need this support. Funding for expert facilitation of thematic discussions and to support evidence-based analysis has also been highlighted as relevant support. Box 3.3 provides an example of the funding model of the CSIPM for relations with the United Nations Committee on World Food Security (UN CFS).

Box 3.3. Funding model of the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSIPM) for Relations with the UN Committee on World Food Security

Since the constitution of its first Coordination Committee in May 2011, the CSIPM has been financed mainly by governments and international institutions active in the UN CFS. The latest publicly available budget figure for 2021 is a total expenditure of EUR €417 707, which is broadly in line with previous years. More than 85% of the resources provided to the CSIPM from 2011 to 2023 were granted by the following donors: the European Union (33.3%), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (33.3%), Germany, Brazil, Spain, Norway, Italy, France. The International Fund for Agricultural Development and the Food and Agriculture Organization supported CSIPM activities with both financial and in-kind contributions, such as hosting mechanism meetings and events. CSOs and non-

governmental organisations active in the CSIPM also contributed to financing by providing almost 15% of its financial resources through in-kind contributions and covering participation costs for their representatives.

The budget covers the following:

- Participation of CSO representatives in the Advisory Group (policy and technical support, flights and local transport, accommodation and food, visas and insurance).
- Costs of the Coordination Committee and the working groups (meetings and communications, outreach, consultations, preparation of work).
- Secretariat costs (four full-time staff salaries and operational costs such as telephones and printing).
- Accountability, monitoring and evaluation reviews.

Sources: Detailed breakdown of the budget envelope and contributions by donor: CSM (n.d.[6]), *CSM Expenditures 2011-2019 (Euros €)*, https://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/CSM-budget-information-2011-2019.pdf; items covered by the funding: CFS (2010[7]), *CSM Founding Document, Annex 1*, https://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Proposal-for-an-international-civil-society-mechanism.pdf.

To enhance transparency, it might also be appropriate to clearly distinguish logistical support budget lines from those for capacity-building, research and analysis, advocacy, communications and other substantial activities other than the functioning of the mechanism.

Provision of feedback

Providing feedback means informing the stakeholders consulted of whether and how their inputs were taken into account in the final decisions adopted by the international entities, regardless of whether they were taken on board. In line with Principle 5 on stakeholder engagement of the OECD Compendium of International Organisations' Practices (2021[66]) to "Facilitate clear, effective and detailed communication with stakeholders", an obligation to consider stakeholders' inputs and provide subsequent updates on how they were used is a crucial success factor of strong engagement mechanisms. It significantly strengthens incentives for stakeholders to engage with the engagement mechanism and can avoid consultation fatigue, which may happen when stakeholders put a great effort into providing inputs and do not hear back on how they were used. Furthermore, it can build ownership of the outcomes and strengthen trust. To reap these benefits, feedback should be mandatory, meaningful and provided systematically with clear deadlines for the authorities. It should be balanced with the need not to over-burden the authorities given the number of inputs received.

In practice and to ensure the balance outlined above, different options could be considered, which include:

- Periodic feedback reports drafted by international entities: this type of feedback could provide an overview of how the inputs, recommendations and contributions provided by stakeholders were considered and incorporated into the decision-making process and policy formulation, explaining the reasons why some inputs might have been discarded.
- Ad hoc feedback after each contribution, if the amount of input received allows.
- Dedicated meetings for this purpose either on a large scale and open to the full membership or between governing organs.
- Informal feedback during the liaison meetings between the international entities and the representatives of the mechanism.

Stakeholders interviewed have suggested that a combination of these approaches would be highly appreciated.

Box 3.4 provides a good practice example of feedback provision in the context of the African Union (AU)-European Union (EU) Human Rights Dialogue.

Box 3.4. Examples of feedback provision

Civil society participation in the AU-EU Human Rights Dialogue

The European Union and the African Union hold regular high-level Human Rights Dialogues that serve as a platform to discuss the situation of human rights in the respective continents, including specific country situations, sharing experiences and strengthening co-operation on human rights issues.

For more than ten years, civil society representatives of both continents, led by a Steering Committee made up of three European and three African CSOs, have organised a forum ahead of the annual Human Rights Dialogue to discuss and agree on recommendations for the high-level dialogue. The civil society Steering Committee representatives are then granted a speaking slot during the dialogue to present their recommendations to EU and AU representatives.

Following the Human Rights Dialogue, a debrief session at a technical level is organised by the European Union with European civil society to briefly present what was discussed during the dialogue and answer any questions the CSOs might have. This, in turn, helps CSOs monitor the implementation of the commitments made in the AU-EU Final Communiqués and the consideration given to their own recommendations.

Sources:EEAS (2021[11]), *17th AU-EU Human Rights Dialogue joint communique*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/african-union-au/17th-au-eu-human-rights-dialogue-joint-communique_en.

Improving the process over time through monitoring and impact evaluation

It is important for stakeholders and international entities to co-build and agree on the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and impact assessment frameworks, as well as on clear accountability mechanisms, from the beginning of the participatory process. The impact assessment framework should include key indicators of the success of the process jointly developed by stakeholders and international entities. This helps clarify expectations on both sides and ensure a clear, mutually agreed way to ascertain whether the stakeholders' perspective has been meaningfully provided and considered for decision making in view of both the procedural steps followed and the substantive outcomes.

International entities should refrain from qualifying the engagement as successful before conducting a participatory M&E in line with the agreed criteria. In view of the importance of this aspect for the legitimacy of the overall mechanism and its improvement over time, specific financial resources should be allocated to monitor the implementation of the mechanism on an annual basis. At the same time, the established M&E mechanism should be feasible and not too burdensome in terms of data collection, analysis and reporting.

This approach regarding monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment should be rooted in a clear set of ground rules that can be written and incorporated into the founding document of the participatory mechanism or other formal text such as terms of reference. The co-ordinating body of the participatory process can update these terms of reference if there are changes.

M&E processes can be conducted internally by a specific team. However, M&E conducted externally, such as through an independent review, is possibly the best option to ensure impartiality, assess objectively whether the process has been achieving its objectives and is properly managed, and propose improvements. Civic monitoring or self-reporting, whereby stakeholders (mechanism members and/or non-members) could support monitoring and evaluating the mechanism's effectiveness through feedback surveys, interviews, etc., could also be considered a complementary measure. Box 3.5 shows an example of citizen involvement in monitoring the implementation of an international agreement.

Box 3.5. Citizen representatives in the Implementation and Compliance Support Committee under the Escazú Agreement

The parties to the Escazú Agreement created the Implementation and Compliance Support Committee as a subsidiary body to the conference to promote implementation and support the parties in implementing the agreement.

The committee's specific functions include producing periodic reports on systemic issues related to the application and compliance with the agreement and providing advice and guidance to the parties in regard to implementation. This includes an interpretive function of the committee regarding the agreement: it may draft, at the committee's initiative, notes on the agreement's interpretation or do it to respond to a particular query from the parties or the public. Further, the committee is tasked with examining allegations of non-compliance with the agreement. Two members of the public, elected as part of the regional mechanism, are part of the compliance committee.

Note: at the moment of drafting these preliminary recommendations, the first citizen members of the committee have not yet been elected, so the implementation of the committee in practice remains to be analysed.
Source: CEPAL (n.d.[12]), *Rules of Procedure of the Implementation and Compliance Support Committee*, https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/48348/2/S2200738_es.pdf.

Designing adequate online and offline participation tools

Nowadays, a range of participation tools is available to maximise the relevance, inclusiveness and reach of a participatory mechanism while considering cost-effectiveness and environmental impact. A cutting-edge engagement mechanism should take full advantage of both innovative and traditional participation options to reach the widest range of stakeholders and gather relevant input. Stakeholder interviews have underscored that using a combination of digital tools and in-person gatherings is the most appropriate approach.

The use of digital tools, such as a comprehensive online platform with interactive features and potentially automated data analysis of the responses when possible (having consultations with closed questions may be best in this regard, to ensure that the large amounts of information received are manageable) and the organisation of hybrid or online meetings, has been indicated by many CSOs as a feasible option even in remote locations, given the spread of the use of these online tools following the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. These tools can gather inputs from stakeholders and individuals worldwide faster than in-person meetings, cutting costs and increasing accessibility. At the same time, careful consideration should be given to the digital divide and other potential barriers to using online tools.

Box 3.6 provides an example of an interactive digital platform created to facilitate citizen participation in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Box 3.6. The interactive digital platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe

The Conference on the Future of Europe was an ad hoc conference launched in 2021 by EU institutions intended to open a space for debate with citizens to address Europe's challenges and priorities. The conference was supported by an executive board responsible for implementing the work and drafting the final report, as well as a joint Secretariat responsible for co-ordination. The conference adopted a variety of participation methods, maximising inclusiveness by combining digital and in-person participation. The main documents and digital platform were translated into the 24 official EU languages. At the same time, all user contributions were available in the 24 languages in real time thanks to the use of automatic translation tools (eTranslation).

A digital platform for the purposes of the conference was created ad hoc, which allowed anyone to submit ideas related to the ten main pre-selected themes and interact with other citizens on the ideas already submitted. It also served as a database of all national events organised in the framework of the conference. This platform was functional for just over a year (19 April 2021 to 9 May 2022). The level of interaction allowed by the platform and eTranslation software enabled an innovative digital participation experience.

The platform was open to the participation of all European citizens. It was developed with open-source software (DECIDIM). Participation on the platform was conditional on registration (surname, first name, email), followed by a voluntary demographic questionnaire. There were no moderation rules on substance, only rules to prevent hate speech. Through the platform, 53 639 people registered and 44 530 contributions were made: 18 955 ideas, 22 242 comments and 6 661 events. At the same time, the conference included in-person participation events to maximise inclusiveness.

Source: EC (2024[69]), *Conference on the Future of Europe*, European Commission, https://futureu.europa.eu/ accessed on 27 November 2024.

In-person consultation events can include: participation of stakeholders in official meetings with decision makers; the organisation of open meetings between stakeholders/individuals with technical-level representatives of international entities to discuss policy issues; focus groups, workshops or roundtable discussions. A small number of key in-person meetings could effectively complement online engagement, depending on available resources and bearing in mind the environmental impact of potentially long-haul flights.

In-person participative/co-creation policy workshops could also be helpful in engaging individuals. It may be necessary to involve experienced facilitators to ensure strong discussions and innovative ideas. Depending on their previous levels of engagement, stakeholders and individual citizens may need capacity building around the topics covered by the participation initiative to participate effectively.

Fostering inclusiveness: Engagement of underrepresented and vulnerable groups

In order to ensure inclusiveness, ways to remove/reduce barriers that make participation difficult should be envisioned, such as those related to language, geographic location or distance, abilities, age, income, connectivity, culture bias or discrimination. As mentioned above, prioritising a combination of digital and in-person avenues for participation can reduce costs and distance limitations while taking into account connectivity gaps. To enable in-person meetings, providing resources for travel, visa facilitation and

capacity building, as mentioned above, can address barriers related to lower income and the limited capacities of CSOs. Physical facilities where the meetings take place should be accessible.

To ensure accessibility of online tools for stakeholders with limited digital skills, guidelines and technical training on using the online platform that may have been developed as part of the engagement mechanism can be shared. Some participants may be illiterate and related arrangements should be made with the help of experts. In addition, participation tools may be developed and adapted for those with visual and hearing impairments. Online meetings should accommodate multiple time zones insofar as possible.

Several stakeholders have also underscored that limited and unstable Internet connectivity is a challenge to participation in some locations. Any online platform developed and the choice of online meeting tools should take this into account by reducing the amount of bandwidth it requires and/or by developing simplified versions of the digital tools that accommodate more limited bandwidths. Additional support can also be provided to session organisers, speakers and stakeholders who need additional bandwidth or increased connectivity to participate effectively.

A key measure highlighted by stakeholders and present in successful engagement mechanisms is to devote resources to translating/interpreting documents and meetings into the most prevalent languages spoken throughout the affected regions, as well as into local languages for specific purposes, if appropriate.

Easy-to-understand informational materials using clear, plain language on the activities and proposals can also be provided to avoid engagement barriers related to the highly technical style of official documents; such materials could also include video and audio to take into consideration illiterate citizens.

Stakeholder participation tools should, insofar as possible, be made accessible to individuals with disabilities, including those with mobility, visual, auditory or cognitive impairments. Measures can include providing materials in accessible formats like Braille, large print or audio and providing sign language interpretation and subtitles during meetings and events. International entities may consider actively involving persons with disabilities – or organisations that represent them – in designing and implementing such tools to ensure their usefulness.

In addition, avenues should be found to address potential power imbalances and participants' fear of retaliation in challenging contexts by finding ways to ensure they feel safe to express themselves and contribute their input. This could be done, among others, by using secure platforms with encryption, providing avenues for anonymous contribution through an online platform or by filling out anonymous paper forms.

Finally, cultural differences in decision-making and negotiation styles can be taken into account. Stakeholder interviews have underscored that some people may be less comfortable expressing their views openly than others, especially when contradictory, given their cultural background or personal preference. To address this, speaking slots could be allocated to speakers taking into account a balance of regions, gender, age, category of stakeholders, etc. (instead of only opening the floor) and the possibility of submitting inputs in writing following discussions should be made available.

Communicating effectively about the process

To ensure meaningful stakeholder participation, a participatory mechanism or process must be known to and well understood by its target audience. Developing a meaningful public communications strategy to raise awareness about the mechanism will be an essential element to ensure its uptake and maximise its potential. Public communication is most effective when it is inclusive, responsive and compelling (Alfonsi et al., 2022[14]). There is no one-size-fits-all approach. Therefore, inclusiveness is key: diverse groups consume news and information differently, respond to certain messages, not others and are more or less vulnerable to misinformation. Communicators should aim to understand these differences and tailor their

approaches to reach beyond the constituencies that are easier to reach. Tools and channels can be different depending on the country's context and based on understanding different audiences' needs, expectations, preferred means of communication and knowledge of topics at hand. In this sense, proactive outreach to underrepresented target groups and efforts to maximise reach to the general public are essential.

Ensuring responsiveness means adopting a demand-driven approach to communication to meet citizens' expectations for information and engagement. Finally, making communication compelling is a growing imperative in an information ecosystem that is overcrowded and prone to spreading misinformation. Amid a growing tendency for many to experience information overload from a saturated information ecosystem, simple exposure to a message is not necessarily sufficient even to raise awareness.

A diversity of media could be used simultaneously to create a wide impact, such as a website translated into several languages, traditional media, community radios, telephone, social media, newsletters and in-person engagement. Communication campaigns to raise awareness of participation opportunities have proven impactful in different contexts. For example, during the Conference on the Future of Europe, participation on the platform was broadly steady but saw three peaks in April 2021, May 2021 and February 2022, which coincided with the launch of the platform and the two subsequent communications campaigns, confirming the importance of communication to foster participation.

Other good practice examples of stakeholder engagement include initiatives to reach vulnerable populations to inform them of the existence and processes of the participation mechanism and build their participation capacity (e.g. such initiatives are conducted in the CSIPM, the Framework for Dialogue between DAC and CSOs, and in the context of 2030 Agenda engagement).

Capacity-building strategies

Capacity-building initiatives, both on the topics covered by an international organisation and on certain tools (such as policy analysis or advocacy tools), have been underscored by stakeholder interviewees as crucial to enable meaningful participation. Capacity development could take a variety of forms, benefitting from innovative approaches such as developing courses on digital platforms (massive open online course or MOOCs), providing internship opportunities within international entities, tutoring with senior experts, open-sourced libraries on policy issues and positions, in-person and virtual training sessions, etc. Different kinds of organisations have different capacity needs and initiatives should be tailored to each constituency or type of stakeholder.

For many civil society actors, capacity considerations are preconditions for participation. Ideally, capacity development should therefore start ahead of the launch of new participatory processes. Target groups for capacity development funding should be broader than the direct participants in the process to create the conditions for reaching out to new actors and sectors. Stakeholder interviews have highlighted that from a civil society perspective, resources linked to capacity building would gain legitimacy and sustainability if they were used through and within existing CSO networks and platforms, as well as if they were part of a broader co-ordinated effort to strengthen the civil society ecosystem at the national level. Box 3.7 provides an example of capacity-building initiatives in the CPDE.

Box 3.7. CPDE capacity-building efforts

The CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) is a platform that gathers CSOs from around the world on the issue of effective development co-operation. It has developed training modules for member and partner CSOs, especially national- or country-level ones, to support their capacity development.

The CPDE aims to equip CSOs to manage programmes, particularly for advocacy, organise and manage networks based on a human-rights-based approach to development and other key CPDE principles, and launch and sustain advocacy campaigns, especially on development co-operation. This way, the CPDE also promotes CSO development effectiveness. Some materials include:

- A Network Management Training Module: tools, resources and practical guidance to improve their operations and organisational practices as CSO networks.
- A CPDE Project Management Training Module to Advance Effective Development Cooperation.
- A Guide for Dialogue with Development Partners and Donors.
- A CSO Guide on Project Management: Demonstrating Results and Accountability.
- A CPDE Advocacy Toolkit.

Source: CPDE (n.d.[15]), *Capacity Development for CSOs*, https://csopartnership.org/capacity-development-for-csos/.

Another possibility to strengthen the capacities of participating organisations is to develop easy-to-understand materials about the themes that the authorities and inner workings of an international organisation or process will discuss. For example, the *G20 Handbook* was developed as a publication that explains key G20 Forum concepts and themes. The publication, produced by the BRICS Policy Center, part of the Institute of International Relations of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, in collaboration with the *Rede Jubileu Sul* ahead of the 2024 meeting under the Brazilian presidency of the G20, elucidates key concepts and provides information about the G20 for a diverse audience. The proposal was for the handbook to serve as a comprehensive reference for CSOs, the press, academics and activists seeking information on the forum that convenes the world's largest economies (BRICS Policy Center & Rede Jubileu Sul, 2024[16]) .

If appropriate, capacity development could extend to civil servants/authorities at the international, national and local levels responsible for implementing the stakeholder engagement process, if applicable to the context.

In line with the above considerations, funding of the mechanism/process itself should ideally be separated from funding of capacity development, i.e. providing this support should not be conditioned to participate. Rather, it could be considered an additional tool to create the conditions for genuine participation of the weakest actors the process wants to engage with. Strictly linking capacity development to participation may be perceived as a carrot (and a stick) for participating in the process. In addition, this provides flexibility in relation to the funding source for capacity building, which may come from other financial tools, such as donors' pool funding for capacity development.

Providing sufficient advance notice and information

Experience from various international stakeholder engagement efforts highlights the challenges CSOs and others face in collating, synthesising, and co-ordinating their inputs effectively across wide territories and thematic areas. For this reason, stakeholders have repeatedly underlined that short notice often does not

allow for the meaningful elaboration of input**.** Advance notice of at least one month (and, if possible, more) ahead of an official meeting or a consultation should be provided with all relevant documents and information enabling stakeholders to contribute. The required advance information notice should be compulsory and formalised in the engagement mechanism. Organising information sessions ahead of key moments in the policy cycle to prepare the discussion and ensure a level playing field among stakeholders could be considered.

Committing to an ethical and transparent process

Integrity, ethics and compliance

Establishing a code of ethics within an institutionalised international stakeholder engagement mechanism or initiative can be good practice to promote integrity, transparency and accountability in its operations. It can serve as a guiding framework for all stakeholders involved, mitigating conflicts of interest, promoting fair and respectful interactions among stakeholders and safeguarding against unethical practices such as bribery, corruption or undue influence. Moreover, a code of ethics can foster trust and credibility. Along similar lines, ensuring compliance with established norms and procedures is essential for maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of any international stakeholder engagement mechanism. An internal or independent compliance team can play a crucial role in addressing complaints and monitoring and preventing cases of conflict of interest. This team could serve as a central contact point for stakeholders to raise concerns related to adherence to established norms and procedures. It could be responsible for investigating complaints and implementing appropriate measures to address any identified issues.

In addition, some international entities have also introduced ethical constraints regarding the content and substance of participation. The UN Civil Society Conference provided in its 2019 Code of Conduct that "[a]ny communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language referring to a person or group based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender, sexual orientation or other immutable characteristic or identity factor, will not be tolerated" (United Nations, 2019[17])". .

Transparency

Transparency should be considered a fundamental ground rule for international stakeholder engagement. No information should be considered confidential unless there is a clear exception, in line with the "open by default" principle. All information on the consultation process should be immediately disclosed (e.g. agendas and minutes from internal meetings, decisions from the governance or steering body, agenda setting, planning of activities, documents to be reviewed, etc.). On policy content, all propositions issued by international entities and stakeholders should be made accessible to the public, including dissenting opinions that differ from consolidated inputs as agreed by the mechanism's participants. Transparency efforts may also include: the production of annual reports about participation activities, including governance and financial information; the provision of public and systematic feedback to the CSOs' constituencies and broader sectors of CSOs/the public about the activities and results; and the public explanation of processes such as selection of co-ordinating committee members or the outcomes of voting/discussion processes conducted to reach policy positions. The contact details of the staff in the international organisation responsible for stakeholder participation under the participatory mechanism should be made available on the mechanism's dedicated website and the international organisation's website and organisational chart.

Dispute resolution

Establishing rules and procedures for dispute resolution can foster effective collaboration and mitigate conflicts that may arise among members or organs of any stakeholder engagement mechanism. Participatory mechanisms at the international level acknowledge the diverse perspectives and interests of stakeholders involved and the potential for disagreements amidst varying agendas and objectives. Clear guidelines and processes for handling disputes can provide a structured framework for resolving conflicts fairly, transparently and equitably. Depending on the nature and complexity of the dispute, options include mechanisms for mediation, arbitration or facilitated dialogue. Such rules and procedures serve to promote accountability, uphold the integrity of the engagement process and safeguard the interests of all parties involved. The role of mediating and deciding upon disputes could be played by members of a mechanism's body appointed for this purpose, in line with clear rules that ensure impartiality, or by a separate organ created for this purpose, depending on the mechanism's size and complexity.

Box 3.8 provides examples of different transparency, integrity and dispute resolution initiatives in several stakeholder engagement mechanisms.

Box 3.8. Transparency, integrity and dispute resolution practices

Different approaches to ensuring transparency and integrity within stakeholder engagement mechanisms include the following:

- The **Council of Europe Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations** has introduced a code of conduct for CSOs, including a detailed procedure for complaints and violations. This may result in the imposition of a sanction ranging from a temporary deprivation of the right of the participant to speak to a recommendation to the Council of Europe Secretary-General to revoke or suspend the participant's participatory status.
- The **Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum** has established an independent **Compliance Committee** comprising five CSO members. This committee operates in accordance with the principles outlined in the forum's Code of Ethical Conduct. It serves as the focal point for addressing complaints, disagreements and conflict of interest risks within the forum. The Compliance Committee reports its findings and recommendations to the forum's general assembly, ensuring transparency and accountability in resolving disputes and compliance matters.
- The Civil Society and Indigenous People's Mechanism of the UN Committee on Food Security publishes **annual reports** disclosing all of the activities conducted, as well as **all policy opinions, including dissenting ones**.
- The CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) has established an **Independent Accountability Committee** to help and assist the governance structures and the global secretariat to ensure that the CPDE meets and maintains high standards of transparency, accountability and integrity.

Sources: CSIPM reports and policy opinions: CSIPM (n.d.[18]), *What is the CSIPM?*, https://www.csm4cfs.org/what-is-the-csm/; EaP-CSF (2019[19]), *Rules of Procedure, Compliance Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum*, https://eap-csf.eu/wp-content/uploads/Compliance-Committee-Rules-of-Procedures.pdf; Relating to the IAC: CPDE (n.d.[20]), *Structure and Governance*, https://csopartnership.org/structure-and-governance/.

Summary of key recommendations

Governance and facilitation

- Create adequate support structures in accordance with the degree of complexity of the participation initiative, which may include a secretariat, a steering committee and policy discussion bodies such as thematic working groups.

Participation tools

- Consider a combination of participation tools, including in-person and hybrid meetings, online meetings and digital consultation options to maximise reach while considering digital divides and other barriers, as well as cost-effectiveness and environmental concerns.

Ensuring necessary support to enable meaningful participation

- Allocate stable, institutionalised and sufficient funding to the mechanism to enable smooth operations. Consider funding beyond the mechanism's structure to support the logistics of the mechanism (travel, translation/interpretation, etc.), as well as research, policy analysis and advocacy efforts of the mechanism.
- Provide capacity-building opportunities for member and non-member stakeholders to enable meaningful participation and promote inclusiveness. Allocate specific, adequate resources to capacity building.

Promoting inclusiveness and diversity of stakeholders

- Foster self-selection of stakeholders based on clear and transparent criteria insofar as possible.
- Commit to inclusiveness and diversity of the stakeholder engagement mechanism by adopting measures to reach out to underrepresented groups. Measures to reduce/remove potential barriers to participation include, among others:
  - Translation and interpretation into key languages.
  - Creating easy-to-understand materials about the engagement process.
  - Using a variety of adapted digital and in-person media for participation.
  - Addressing potential power imbalances by providing anonymous avenues to contribute.
  - Taking into account cultural differences in participation styles.
- Communicate widely and openly about the process, including through proactive outreach.
- Ensure the provision of sufficient advance notice and the sharing of relevant information and documents.

Ensuring transparency and accountability of participation

- Provide systematic and meaningful feedback to stakeholders on the outcome of their participation.
- Co-build and agree on the M&E and impact assessment frameworks as well as on clear accountability mechanisms from the early stages of the process, and allocate resources to conduct this process annually.
- Consider adopting a code of ethics for any participation initiative to foster integrity.
- Establish transparency as a core criterion of the stakeholder engagement mechanism.
- Envision a clear and fair procedure or organ for dispute resolution among stakeholders.

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Note

[1] The Reference Group has established a special thematic working group for this purpose.