
NGO Participation in Multilateral and Multistakeholder Forums: Good Practice Examples

June 2020

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements: This brief was written by Sheetal Kumar of Global Partners Digital (GPD) and Allison Pytlak of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The authors are grateful to Leida Rijnhout (Leapfrog2SD) and staff at the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People for their input.

Contents

Introduction	01
Section 1: NGO participation in disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation processes	03
UN General Assembly First Committee	03
Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons (PoA)	04
Meetings of the Arms Trade Treaty	06
GGE on Lethal Autonomous Weapons	07
Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT)	08
Section 2: Other UNGA-mandated processes	11
Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing	11
Ad-hoc Open-Ended Working Group “Towards a Global Pact for the Environment”	12
WSIS+10 Review Intergovernmental Preparatory Process for the High-Level Meeting	13

Introduction

The establishment of the UN's Open-ended Working Group (OEWG) on Developments in ICTs in the context of international security was intended to be the UN's first open and accessible forum to discuss ICTs in this specific context. It was established by the UN General Assembly and its First Committee on Disarmament and International Security in 2018.

Despite its aspirations of openness and inclusivity, important non-governmental stakeholders have been consistently excluded from the substantive OEWG sessions. This document, intended for those supportive of improving non-governmental and multistakeholder access and participation, provides a range of examples of good practice for engaging non-governmental stakeholders in disarmament and arms control forums and in other UN General Assembly-mandated processes. The aim is to inform ongoing discussions and practices regarding modalities for the engagement of non-governmental stakeholders in discussions relevant to ICTs within current and future bodies mandated by the First Committee.

In section 1, we look at examples of five disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation processes and in section 2 we consider three other UN General Assembly-mandated processes. For each, a short description of each mechanism is presented, followed by information regarding NGO access to meetings and participation.

For the purpose of this paper, and as per usual UN practice, civil society is used interchangeably with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and may also include industry, academia and other non-governmental organisations.

Section 1: NGO participation in disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation processes

1. UN General Assembly First Committee

Short description of mechanism/process

The First Committee is one of six committees convened by the General Assembly. The First Committee deals with disarmament, global challenges and threats to peace that affect the international community and seeks out solutions to the challenges in the international security regime.

It considers all disarmament and international security matters within the scope of the UN Charter or relating to the powers and functions of any other organ of the UN, the general principles of cooperation in the maintenance of international peace and security, as well as principles governing disarmament and the regulation of armaments, promotion of cooperative arrangements and measures aimed at strengthening stability through lower levels of armaments.

It meets for five weeks on an annual basis, starting in early October. Resolutions adopted in the First Committee are forwarded to the General Assembly for endorsement there.¹

Opportunities for non-governmental engagement

NGO access to meetings

As with other meetings of the General Assembly, anyone with a valid UN grounds pass can attend the First Committee sessions.²

NGO liaison³

There is no dedicated NGO liaison for the First Committee. However, one civil society group, Women's League of International Peace and Freedom (WILPF), has for over a decade maintained a website with all statements, resolutions, voting records, etc. It also produces a weekly report on the proceedings.

NGO participation in meetings

There is a single, 90-minute session of the First Committee allocated to presentations from civil society groups. For many years this session occurred at the end of the "thematic debate", before voting on resolutions opened. Civil society argued that this reduced the impact of their interventions. Following a decision adopted by UN member states in 2016, this session now

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/ga/first/>

² Information on how civil society organisations can obtain annual or temporary grounds passes can be found at <http://csonet.org/?menu=86>. Grounds passes are issued to NGOs in consultative status with ECOSOC, as well as for DPI-affiliated organisations although the application process and rights available differ for ECOSOC-accredited and DPI-affiliated groups. For ECOSOC-accredited groups, ground passes can be issued for a year (annual passes) or may be temporary, allowing limited accreditation to a specific meeting or process only. More information on ECOSOC status can be found here: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/civil-society/ecosoc-status.html>.

³ A NGO liaison facilitates the participation of NGOs in UN meetings, including by acting as the main point of contact for both NGOs and go-between the administrative functions of the UN, member states and NGOs. NGO liaisons share information regarding modalities for NGOs, such as information on access in meetings and opportunities to speak and share materials at meetings and organise side events. There isn't a fixed method by which the organisation is appointed/chosen or duration and in some cases the process can be very informal.

occurs between the “general debate” and the “thematic debate”. The responsibility for how to use this session lies with two organisations that act as coordinators, and the practice for several years has been to have one statement per thematic topic, rather than multiple statements on one of the First Committee issues. These are usually presented by the primary campaign or network active on each issue (e.g the Campaign to Ban Landmines, the Control Arms Coalition, International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons).

Civil society attendance is very high throughout most weeks of the session. Groups tend to come to New York for the times when the issues they follow will be debated by the Committee (i.e. nuclear weapons issues, conventional weapons, outer space) rather than remain for the full duration.

Sharing of materials/side events

A materials table is traditionally set out near the doors of the conference room and many civil society organisations distribute materials there. Civil society is not allowed to place materials directly on the desks of delegates, unless it is a side event Hlyer that has been pre-approved.

There is a lot of informal activity such as bilateral meetings between governments and civil society inclusive of advocacy, funding inquiries, etc. There are also receptions which provide a setting for informal dialogue as well as numerous side events or off-site workshops and events organised by both governments and civil society. These provide an opportunity to demonstrate and contribute expertise as well as advocate speciHic views or highlight initiatives.

2. Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons (PoA)

Short description of mechanism/process

The UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons (PoA) is a politically binding instrument outlining various activities to counter the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons and control the negative consequences of Small Arms and Light Weapons. It was adopted by all UN member states in 2001. Since that time the UN has worked to support the implementation of the PoA at national, regional, and international levels. It has hosted three Review Conferences in 2006, 2012, and 2018, sixth Biennial Meetings of States in 2003, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2014, and 2016 and two meetings of government experts in 2011 and 2015.⁴

⁴ <http://unrcpd.org/conventional-weapons/poa/>

Opportunities for non-governmental engagement

NGO access to meetings

NGO participation (which includes industry groups and the arms lobby) is determined in Rules of Procedure (RoP) that are adopted ahead of every Biennial Meeting of States and Review Conference at organising meetings. They have not differed significantly from year to year.

The 2018 Third Review Conference (RevCon3) RoP set out that ECOSOC accredited NGOs may attend meetings of the Conference and that non-ECOSOC accredited NGOs “relevant and competent to the scope and the purpose of the Conference” may apply to attend, subject to no-objection basis.⁵

NGO liaison

The International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) acts as an NGO liaison, as determined by UNODA and identified as such in an Aide Memoire that is circulated in advance of any conference. The NGO liaison organises how the time allocated to statements will be distributed among participating NGOs.⁶

NGO participation in meetings

Accredited organisations are permitted to address the Conference during a specifically allocated meeting in the agenda.

Sharing of materials/side events

Accredited organisations are permitted to provide material to delegations outside the main Conference room.

There is one conference room allocated to civil society use throughout UNPoA meetings, which is managed by the NGO liaison. It is typically used for side events at the lunch break (interested groups apply through the NGO liaison) and morning coordination meetings. Civil society features often in the side events organised by governments too, and there tends to be a lot of interaction, sharing of materials, etc. One NGO (WILPF) provides daily monitoring of the procedures.

⁵ https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/CONF.192/2018/RC/L.3&referer=/english/&Lang=E

⁶ IANSA is an umbrella coalition of many NGOs and was the primary civil society presence that participated in, and drove, the process to adopt the UNPoA. Most other civil society groups who attend are either an IANSA member or have a positive working relationship with them, with the exception of industry representatives or pro-gun groups.

3. Meetings of the Arms Trade Treaty

Short description of mechanism/process

The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), was adopted by the UN General Assembly to regulate international trade in conventional arms by establishing the highest international standards and to prevent and eradicate illicit trade and diversion of conventional arms. The ATT was adopted by the UN General Assembly in April 2013. At the time of publication, there were 106 state parties. States parties and signatories meet regularly to assess implementation at Conferences of States Parties (CSPs).

Opportunities for non-governmental engagement

NGO access to meetings

NGO participation at CSPs is set out in the Treaty's Rules of Procedure.⁷ Any NGOs, including industry groups, can apply to the President of the Conference through the ATT Secretariat for accreditation to attend the annual CSPs, subject to no objection.⁸

There is no accreditation process for the informal preparatory meetings and meetings of working groups (the intersessional work between the annual CSPs). Anyone with a valid UN grounds pass can participate.

NGO participation in meetings

During informal intersessional meetings of the ATT's working groups and to prepare for the annual states parties conferences, civil society (including industry) can intervene at will by requesting to speak at any moment. Often, non-governmental experts are included in panels and to give expert presentations during working group meetings and most working group chairpersons accept written input on various documentation they circulate, some of which are the basis of decisions taken at the CSPs.

During the annual CSP, civil society are able to deliver interventions in any session by inscribing on the speaker's list. Usually the President calls on non-governmental actors after the member state and international organisation representatives have spoken.

NGO liaison

There is no designated NGO liaison. However, the Control Arms Coalition is the major umbrella network and the majority of participating groups are a member of the coalition or generally like-minded with them. Industry and pro-gun civil society groups also attend and participate.

⁷ <https://thearmstradetreaty.org/conference-documents-csp-5.html>

⁸ In accordance with Rule of Procedure 7.4, any objection notification of a State Party against the representation of a delegation received by the President is referred to the Conference for a procedural decision. In accordance with Rule of Procedure 7.5, any representative of a delegation whose participation has been objected to shall be seated provisionally until the Conference has given its decision (see: <https://thearmstradetreaty.org/registration-process.html>)

Sharing of materials/side events

There are numerous side events during both intersessional meetings and the CSPs, many of which are organised by civil society groups, or in cooperation with them. As these meetings occur outside of the UN, the side event calendar is developed and maintained by the ATT Secretariat and civil society can freely apply to host a side event.

Civil society materials are widely distributed via exhibits outside the conference room, and two organisations (Control Arms and WILPF) publish daily monitors of the proceedings which are distributed to delegates inside the conference room.

4. GGE on Lethal Autonomous Weapons

Short description of mechanism/process

In 2016, the Fifth Review Conference of the High Contracting Parties to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) established an open-ended Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on emerging technologies in the area of lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS). The group is open to states parties and states signatories, international organisations, NGOs, and academic institutions. The GGE is intended to discuss the questions related to emerging technologies in the area of LAWS, in the context of the objectives and purposes of the Convention⁹.

Opportunities for non-governmental engagement

NGO access to meetings

Ahead of each meeting, information on registration of all stakeholders, including NGOs, is set out in a note by the Implementation Support Unit or the Secretariat.¹⁰

NGOs and academic institutions that have not previously attended a CCW meeting are asked to indicate previous interactions between the organisation and the UN in relation to disarmament and nonproliferation issues in their application to attend public sessions of the meetings when applying for accreditation.¹¹ However, there is no distinction between ECOSOC and non-ECOSOC accredited NGOs which means access is based on previous engagement rather than UN accreditation.

⁹ A CCW GGE is not the same as a GGE established under the General Assembly. It is open to all High Contracting Parties and non-states parties, international organisations and non-governmental organisations.

¹⁰ "Role of the Implementation Support Unit",

[https://www.unog.ch/80256EE600585943/\(httpPages\)/F8521A510F455706C12573A6003F49F2?OpenDocument](https://www.unog.ch/80256EE600585943/(httpPages)/F8521A510F455706C12573A6003F49F2?OpenDocument)

¹¹ Per the registration information shared for the 2019 GGE, "NGOs and academic institutions may designate representatives to attend public sessions of the meetings. A letter or note verbale on the official letterhead of the organization should be addressed to the UNODA Geneva Branch requesting participation and listing the full names and titles of the representatives who will attend. A mission statement or summary of work of the organization is also to be provided. In addition, NGOs and academic institutions that have not previously attended a CCW meeting should indicate previous interactions between the organization and the United Nations in relation to disarmament and non-proliferation issues".

NGO participation in meetings

Civil society can deliver interventions easily and usually within any session, enabling a sense of being able to be responsive and contribute to developments in the discussion. Over the years,

GGE chairpersons have arranged expert panel discussions that have featured civil society experts. In particular, participation in the GGE on LAWs is noteworthy for being inclusive of scientific and technical communities, that are either members of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, the main umbrella coalition, or participating independently.

NGO liaison

There is no dedicated NGO liaison. The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots is the main umbrella coalition and most civil society groups attending the GGE are Campaign members, although the GGE also attracts independent groups and academics.

Sharing of materials/side events

There are usually side events during the lunch breaks, which include those organised by civil society groups. Interested organisations can notify the UN Office for Disarmament in Geneva, who provide secretarial and other support to GGE chairpersons, to request to use a conference room for this purpose.

5. Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT)

Short description of mechanism/process

The NPT is considered a “landmark” international treaty whose objective is to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology, to promote cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and to further the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament and general and complete disarmament. The Treaty represents the only binding commitment via a multilateral treaty to the goal of disarmament by the nuclear-weapon states. Opened for signature in 1968, the Treaty entered into force in 1970. On 11 May 1995, the Treaty was extended indefinitely. A total of 191 states have joined the Treaty, including the five nuclear-weapon states. States parties meet once every five years for a four-week long review conference, which is preceded by three two-week long preparatory committee sessions in the years leading up to a review conference.

Opportunities for non-governmental engagement

NGO access to meetings

NGO participation in the NPT Review Conferences is determined by Rules of Procedure, adopted formally at the start of each NPT conference but rarely changed and are based on the same practice year after year. An “information note” ahead of each Conference sets out all information about NGO participation to civil society delegates, including on registration procedures and side events.¹²

¹² <https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2020/documents/inf2.pdf>

Any organisation interested in attending must apply for accreditation and there is no distinction between those with or without ECOSOC status. Once approved by member states (on a no-objection basis), the individuals within an organisational delegation register separately. Temporary ground passes are issued to UN premises to those representatives who need them.¹³

Accredited NGOs are treated as observers, who can view the proceedings of any meeting that is not closed, and receive formal documents of the conference.

NGO liaison

There is a designated NGO liaison who takes responsibility for disseminating information about participation, as well as manages and is responsible for the use of the NGO room and the time allocated for civil society to address the conference. This role has been held by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom for several years.

NGO participation in meetings

There is a single designated session of all conferences for civil society representatives to deliver statements. This is usually held at the end of the general debate and before the thematic discussions or committees. The NGO liaison determines how this time is allocated to NGOs.

Sharing of materials/side events

There is one conference room allocated to civil society use throughout the conference. Groups wishing to use the room for a side event must apply through the NGO liaison, who determines the schedule and allocates space accordingly. Otherwise, organisations need to have the support of a member state to secure another conference room for their event.

There is usually a table for civil society materials set-up near the doors of the conference room to distribute materials. Civil society is not allowed to put materials at the desks of member states, but WILPF is designated to hand out copies of their monitor inside the conference room.

¹³ UN Office of Disarmament Affairs arranges the temporary passes after an NGO has been accredited (following review by member states) and its delegation members individually register. The passes are for the duration of the NPT meeting.

Section 2: Other UNGA-mandated processes

1. Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing

Short description of mechanism/process

The Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) on Ageing was established by the General Assembly through resolution 65/182 in December 2010. The working group is mandated to consider the existing international framework of the human rights of older persons and identify possible gaps and how best to address them, including by considering, as appropriate, the feasibility of further instruments and measures. The OEWG meets annually: the tenth session of the OEWG took place in 2019, and the eleventh is scheduled for 2020.

Opportunities for non-governmental engagement

NGO access to meetings

At its first meeting the OEWG adopted a draft decision entitled “Modalities of participation of non-governmental organizations in the work of the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing”,¹⁴ which sets out that accreditation of NGOs to the OEWG shall be granted to all relevant NGOs with ECOSOC status and that other relevant NGOs may apply to the Secretariat for such accreditation. Accreditation to the OEWG need only be done once and applies for all sessions.¹⁵ Accreditation of new NGOs is approved under the first agenda item of each annual meeting.

The OEWG has also agreed that accredited “Category A status” National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) can take part in the OEWG.

NGO liaison

There is no dedicated NGO liaison, but NGOs can direct queries regarding participation to the UN Focal Point on Ageing, which is part of the Division for Inclusive Social Development (DISD) of UNDESA.

NGO participation in meetings

Accredited organisations are invited to submit written inputs on substantive guiding questions provided by the Secretariat on the OEWG website ahead of the annual meeting. The OEWG Chair has given clear guidance that participation from NGOs should take place. In recent annual meetings, non-governmental experts have been included in panels and invited to give expert presentations on focus areas during the discussion of the annual meetings agenda items. NGOs are able to deliver statements in the opening session of the annual meeting and to participate in the interactive discussions.

Accredited NGOs have been able to intervene in interactive discussions in the substantive sessions by requesting the floor during the debate, at the discretion of the Chair responsible for proceedings on the day and may depend on time available. NGO statements delivered during the annual meetings are published on PaperSmart.

¹⁴ <https://social.un.org/ageing-working-group/ngos-tenthsession.shtml>

¹⁵ Ibid

The Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP) support civil society coordination in the OEWGs, including via joint statements delivered during the opening statements, organising preparatory workshops for NGOs the day before the session commences, supporting the organisation of daily NGO briefings by the NGO Committee on Ageing, and through the publication of daily bulletins for each annual meeting.

Sharing of materials/side events

All presentations, statements, and inputs to the session by NGOs and NHRIs are published on the OEWG on Ageing website.

The distribution of materials to delegations mostly happens at side events and other events throughout the week and in informal conversations around the main conference room.

There are usually two to three side events held daily during the annual meeting. Civil society features often in the side events, along with UN bodies and government representatives. NGOs can apply to DISD to host side events via a form published on the dedicated OEWG webpage for each meeting.

2. Ad-hoc Open-Ended Working Group “Towards a Global Pact for the Environment”

Short description of mechanism/process

The Ad-hoc Open-Ended Working Group “Towards a Global Pact for the Environment” was set up in 2018 by resolution 72/277 to consider a technical and evidence-based report that identifies and assesses possible gaps in international environmental law and environment-related instruments with a view to strengthening their implementation.¹⁶ The Group met three times in 2018 and submitted a report to the UN General Assembly in 2018. In 2019 UNGA adopted resolution 73/333 welcoming the work of the ad-hoc OEWG as well as its report, and endorsed its recommendations.

Opportunities for non-governmental engagement

NGO access to meetings

Attendance at the sessions of the ad-hoc OEWG as observers was open to ECOSOC NGOs, as well as to those that were accredited to relevant conferences and summits, namely: The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development; the World Summit on Sustainable Development; the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, and the United Nations summit for the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda.

¹⁶ https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/72/277

NGO liaison

There was no dedicated or official liaison for the ad-hoc OEWG, but NGOs could direct their questions regarding access to meetings to [unenvironment-civilsociety\[at\]un.org](mailto:unenvironment-civilsociety@un.org). In addition, UN Environment Programme provided support as a liaison by providing and uploading materials to the ad-hoc OEWG webpage so that they were accessible to all delegates, and ensuring that NGO statements, including civil society statements, were communicated to other delegates.

NGO participation in meetings

NGOs were permitted to speak after delegate statements, during the “informal dialogue” portion of the session.¹⁷ At this point, NGOs were allowed to deliver joint statements and speak individually.¹⁸ Accredited NGOs were permitted to attend the formal meetings of the group, receive copies of the official documents, and make their materials available to delegates. There was active participation of NGOs, particularly in the second and third substantive meetings, who met with regional groupings and states, and collaborated on joint statements¹⁹.

Sharing of materials/side events

NGOs could host and participate in side events, as well as share materials with delegates via email and in hard copy.

3. WSIS+10 Review Intergovernmental Preparatory Process for the High-Level Meeting

Short description of mechanism

The WSIS+10 Review was set up by a resolution endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 2015 (60/252), requesting the General Assembly to undertake the overall review of the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). The WSIS, over two high-level meetings in 2003 and 2005, had resulted in “the Geneva Plan of Action” and “Tunis Agenda” respectively. The General Assembly in resolution 68/302 decided that the overall review would be concluded by a two-day High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly, to be preceded by an intergovernmental process that would take into account inputs from all relevant stakeholders.²⁰

Opportunities for non-governmental engagement/process

NGO access to meetings

According to the resolution 68/302 which set out the modalities for the review the President of the General Assembly was instructed to “organise informal interactive consultations with all relevant stakeholders of the [WSIS] in order to collect their input for the intergovernmental

¹⁷ <https://cidce.org/en/towards-a-global-pact-for-the-environment-notes-on-the-second-substantive-session/>

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ <http://worldanimal.net/world-animal-net-blog/item/493-a-global-pact-for-the-environment-third-substantive-session> ; <https://www.commonhomeofhumanity.org/global-pact>

²⁰ <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/68/302>

negotiation process.”²¹ The President was also expected to invite representatives of all relevant WSIS stakeholders to speak during the High-Level Meeting.

Any NGOs with relevant experience engaging in internet policy discussions were invited to apply for accreditation via an online form to attend the informal interactive consultations. NGOs accredited to the informal interactive consultations could apply to attend the High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly on the WSIS+10 Review.

NGO liaison

Unlike the WSIS summits in 2003 and 2005, there was no civil society bureau at the UN or division to facilitate input. Instead, the two co-facilitators appointed by the President of the General Assembly were tasked with collecting inputs from all stakeholders, including civil society, in order to inform the drafting of the outcome document.

NGO participation in meetings

Two informal interactive consultations were held with non-government stakeholders, which included thematic panels that included civil society representatives.

There were two official opportunities to input into the draft outcome text of the process; the first draft, or ‘non-paper’ (July 2015) and the second draft or ‘zero-draft’ (October 2015). A third round of comments on the draft was also opened by the co-facilitators. More than 100 civil society groups in total either submitted text into one or both of these documents, or signed onto joint submissions. Non-governmental stakeholders were also able to engage with the co-facilitators at the 2015 global Internet Governance Forum (IGF) at a dedicated main session attended by the co-facilitators and through side meetings.²²

Representatives of NGOs were invited to address delegates at discussions of the High-Level Meeting and could participate in the interactive discussions.

Sharing of materials/side events

NGOs were able to host side-event events at the High-Level Meeting.

²¹ <https://unctad.org/en/Pages/CSTD/GA-Resolutions-on-ICTs.aspx>

²² <https://www.gp-digital.org/series/advocacy-bytes/wsis10-review/>

GLOBAL PARTNERS DIGITAL

Second Home
68 Hanbury St
London E1 5JL

+44 203 818 3258