



## The Hague International Model United Nations

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**Forum:** Human Rights Commission 2

**Issue:** The role of civil society in advancing democracy

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### Introduction

Civil society organizations (CSOs), including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), grassroots movements, and community groups, are widely recognized by the United Nations as indispensable partners in advancing democratic governance. According to the UN's Guidance Note of the Secretary-General on Democracy, a "freely functioning, well-organized, vibrant and responsible civil society is essential for a democracy," providing platforms for participation, advocacy, and the defense of democratic rights. These groups help ensure that diverse voices—including those of women, youth, and minority communities—are represented in political processes and that governments remain transparent and accountable to the people they serve. Moreover, the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) explicitly supports projects that empower civil society to promote human rights and encourage participatory democracy, reinforcing the idea that democracy thrives not only through institutions but through active civic engagement.<sup>1</sup>

In practice, the role of civil society in strengthening democracy extends beyond advocacy to include facilitating dialogue, monitoring elections, and fostering democratic resilience in the face of contemporary challenges. Events and initiatives supported by international bodies highlight the need to protect civic space and empower CSOs to contribute meaningfully to governance and the rule of law, acknowledging that threats to democratic

systems often coincide with restrictions on civil participation. As global policy discussions increasingly emphasize cooperation between states and civic actors, there is a growing recognition that sustainable democracy depends on enabling environments where civil society can operate freely, engage citizens, and hold power to account.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Civil Society

A wide-ranging domain of voluntary, collective actions by people and institutions functioning outside the realm of the government and the private sector. Civil society encompasses non-governmental organizations (NGOs), grassroots movements, trade unions, professional bodies, independent media, youth groups, women's agencies, religious societies, community organizations, and informal networks.

### Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

Organizations that are formed either officially or unofficially and are concerned with such matters as human rights, environment, labor rights, anti-corruption, community development, or minority rights.

### Democratic Governance

A mode of governing that counts on participation, accountability, transparency, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. This mode is not confined to electoral processes alone but encompasses ordinary civic participation all the time.

### Human Rights Defenders (HRDs)

People who engage in non-violent actions to promote or secure human rights. They usually suffer threats, harassment, or even violence.

### Background Information

Historically, civil society has been central to democratic development, emerging as a space where individuals collectively organize to protect shared interests, values, and rights.

Thinkers such as Alexis de Tocqueville emphasized that active civic associations cultivate democratic habits by encouraging cooperation, political awareness, and public responsibility. In modern democracies, civil society has expanded to include non-governmental organizations, advocacy groups, labor unions, community organizations, and independent media, all of which contribute to pluralism and limit the dominance of state power.

Civil society plays a complex and vital role in sustaining and advancing democratic governance by engaging citizens beyond electoral processes and ensuring inclusive political participation. Through activities such as voter education, rights awareness, and advocacy, civil society organizations empower communities—particularly marginalized groups—to articulate their concerns and influence policymaking. These organizations often serve as intermediaries when political parties or formal institutions fail to represent diverse perspectives, keeping public discourse open, participatory, and responsive to societal needs. In divided or unequal societies, civil society also facilitates dialogue through consultations, peace-building initiatives, and post-conflict negotiations, often reaching populations that distrust formal political institutions.

Equally important is civil society's role in accountability and oversight. Independent organizations monitor elections, scrutinize government budgets, expose corruption, and document human rights violations, helping prevent the concentration of power and reinforcing the rule of law. Although civil society frequently faces challenges such as political intimidation, legal restrictions, and structural inequalities that limit participation, it remains a cornerstone of democratic legitimacy. When supported by an enabling political and legal environment, civil society strengthens governance by amplifying diverse voices, addressing sources of conflict early, and advocating for institutional reform. Ultimately, a strong civil society is essential to a democracy that is inclusive, resilient, and genuinely representative of its people.

## Major Countries and Organizations Involved

### UN and International involvement

- **Human Rights Council Resolution A/HRC/RES/59/10 (2025)**
- **Draft UN Human Rights Council Resolution A/HRC/32/L.29 (2016/2017)**
- **Commission on Human Rights Resolution 2000/47 (2000)**
- **UN Security Council Resolution 2686 (2023)**
- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948)**

### Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA)

The Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) is part of the global network of Open Society Foundations, established in 2000 to promote “open societies where democracy, good governance, the rule of law, basic freedoms and widespread civic participation prevail.” Through advocacy, networking, and support to civil society actors across 18 countries in West Africa, OSIWA works to sustain democratic practices and strengthen local civic engagement in governance processes.

### Partners for Democratic Change International (PDCI)

Partners for Democratic Change International (PDCI) is a global network of NGOs originally founded to support civil and societal reform during democratic transitions in Central and Eastern Europe. It helps build local capacities for civil society, governance, and conflict management through training and mediation, empowering communities and civic actors to engage in constructive democratic processes worldwide.

### European Union (as a collective actor of member states)

The European Union (EU) has encouraged civil society development through long-term support programmes like the Civil Society Facility and new partnerships aimed at preventing restrictions on civic space globally. The EU collaborates with multiple civil society organizations to provide funding, build capacity, and advocate for democratic participation and human rights in partner countries, reinforcing the enabling environment for civic engagement.

### Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1948	Adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).
1966	The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) guarantees freedoms essential for civil society.
2000	The UN Millennium Declaration was signed to set global commitments to human rights, good governance, and democratic participation.
2002	The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) was

established, creating a permanent court to prosecute genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.

- 2016** UN Human Rights Council Resolution 33/22 was passed. The UN formally committed to protecting human rights defenders, recognizing civil society as vital to democracy.
- 2023** UN General Assembly Resolution on Civic Space was passed. The UN condemned restrictions on NGOs and peaceful assembly, reaffirming civil society as essential to democratic life.

### Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Previous attempts to address the role of civil society in advancing democracy have included concrete United Nations initiatives aimed at strengthening civic engagement and democratic governance globally. A key example is the establishment of the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) in 2005, which was designed to support civil society organizations in promoting human rights and inclusive democratic processes, with the majority of funds going to local CSOs in countries at various stages of democratization, thus directly empowering civil society actors to contribute to democratic development.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the UN has repeatedly highlighted the importance of an open civic space, such as in the context of the International Day of Democracy, where the Secretary-General emphasized that civic participation is essential to democratic progress and called for the protection of civil society's freedom to operate.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, collaborative projects, like those between the United Nations Development Programme and local civil society groups in Ukraine to enhance organizational capacities and foster participatory governance, illustrate how past efforts have sought to institutionalize CSO engagement in reform processes.

### Possible Solutions

Possible solutions to strengthening the role of civil society in advancing democracy center on creating and protecting an enabling environment in which civic actors can operate freely, safely, and effectively. Governments should adopt and enforce legal frameworks that guarantee freedoms of expression, association, and assembly, while ending harassment,

arbitrary detention, and violence against activists, journalists, and human rights defenders. Increased and transparent funding—both domestic and international—can help build the institutional capacity of civil society organizations, particularly those representing women, youth, indigenous peoples, and other marginalized groups. Expanding access to independent media and digital spaces, alongside safeguards against censorship and disinformation, would further enhance civic engagement and public accountability. Finally, structured dialogue mechanisms between governments and civil society, such as consultative forums and participatory policymaking processes, can ensure that civic input meaningfully informs decision-making, thereby reinforcing democratic legitimacy and social trust.

### Endnotes

1. “Guidance Note of the UN Secretary-General on Democracy.” United Nations, [www.un.org/democracyfund/content/guidance-note-un-secretary-general-democracy](http://www.un.org/democracyfund/content/guidance-note-un-secretary-general-democracy)
2. United Nations. “International Day of Democracy | United Nations.” United Nations, [www.un.org/en/observances/democracy-day](http://www.un.org/en/observances/democracy-day).

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