


Civil Society Participation in the United Nations

How do I get in to the United Nations?


The United Nations is a system composed of different bodies with different rules about the participation of members of civil society.

The General Assembly

 The General Assembly is made up of representatives of the 192 member states of the United Nations. Each state has one vote. Decisions are made by majority vote, but there is a strong effort to achieve consensus. The General Assembly can issue resolutions, but they are not binding.

Who can play: Only member states may participate in debates in the General Assembly.


Economic and Social Council

 The Economic and Social Council (or 'EcoSoc') is the coordinating body for UN agencies working on social and economic policy (as opposed to the Security Council, which works on security issues). There are 54 seats on the Council. Member states are elected by the General Assembly to serve three-year terms. Seats on the Council are allotted based on regional representation. The Council holds regular consultative meetings with civil society organizations and member states throughout the year. The Council oversees the Commission on the Status of Women, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the Division for the Advancement of Women.

Who can play: Civil society organizations can apply for EcoSoc status. Organizations with EcoSoc status can participate in meetings of the EcoSoc commissions (such as the annual meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women). However, their participation is usually limited to making written submissions in advance of the meeting, making oral presentations during expert panel discussions at the invitation of a member state, and observing the meeting.

To apply: <http://esango.un.org/paperless/Web?page=static&content=apply>

Human Rights Council

 The Human Rights Council was set up by the General Assembly. It reviews human rights violations and compliance with international human rights norms. It has 47 seats, held by member states. The Human Rights Council oversees the Universal Periodic Review. This is a process by which the human rights record of every member state of the United Nations is reviewed every four years.

Who can play: Civil society organizations can make submissions to the Human Rights Council and can participate in Universal Periodic Review Working Group sessions. They must have EcoSoc status and they must make an additional application to be granted 'accredited' status for the Universal Periodic Review.

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)



The Committee monitors the implementation of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Optional Protocol to CEDAW. The Committee is made up of 23 experts, appointed by member states for four-year terms. CEDAW is binding only if states have ratified it. Member states must report to the Committee every four years. The Committee can make recommendations for implementation to the member states.

Who can play: Member states that have ratified CEDAW submit official reports on their progress every four years. Civil society organizations and experts are also invited to submit 'shadow reports' on their government's progress.



The Security Council



The Security Council is composed of five permanent members (member states) and ten rotating positions. The five permanent members of the Security Council are: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Other UN member states are elected for a term on the Security Council.

For decisions by the Security Council to pass, all five of the permanent member-states must vote in favor or abstain. Security Council Resolutions are binding international law. If UN member states do not comply with UN Security Council Resolutions, the UN Security Council may consider sanctions or other actions against the member state.

Who can play: During their regular debates, only the 15 member states can vote. However, since 1992, the Council has held informal meetings with experts from civil society. These are called 'Arria Formula Meetings.' These meetings are usually attended by all Security Council members. Civil society representatives may then present to the Security Council members, but only by invitation from those members.