



**Submission by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation,
NGO in General Consultative Status with the UN Economic and
Social Council (ECOSOC)**

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

**2012 Human Rights Council Social Forum
'People Centred Development and Globalisation'**

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Introduction

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation is a global movement of civil society with members and partners in over 100 countries. CIVICUS welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the 2012 UN Human Rights Council Social Forum on 'People Centred Development and Globalisation'.

CIVICUS believes that developmental initiatives at local, national and global levels must be genuinely inclusive and participative, taking into account the needs and aspirations of all sections of society, in particular women, young people, vulnerable and marginalised groups. Policy formulation and implementation thus must be people-centred. Moreover, processes must be grounded in democratic principles and equality in relations amongst peoples and nations.

CIVICUS provides below, comments on the three themes of 2012 UN Human Rights Council Social Forum.

1. People-centred development and global governance in an era of multiple challenges and social transformation

Today, the world is faced with a convergence of economic, social, political and environmental crises and yet the response to each of these from governments and international institutions has largely been business as usual. At the national level, the response of governments to crises has taken the form of cutbacks in the public sector, a crack down on the spaces and vehicles for dissent and the implementation of policies that foster economic and social inequality and poverty. Governments and international institutions need to focus on the needs of the people in critical areas affected by poverty and not just propose and implement general solutions across nations.

Decision-makers must ensure that individuals and nations have equal opportunities to reap the benefits of development and be aware that addressing more fundamental questions of equity, sustainability and accountability requires placing human rights at the forefront and ensuring democratic governance at every level from local to national to global.

While current environmental and human induced crises being experienced across the globe have given rise to very serious challenges for humanity, they also present opportunities to rethink governance paradigms from global to regional, national and local levels. The existing institutional arrangements that govern relations between citizens, the state and other actors of power including the market are not delivering at most levels. This indicates that governments and related institutions are failing on even their basic obligations to citizens at national and international level.

Yet the voices of citizens and civil society continue to be stifled in national and international decision-making processes. Even in cases where citizens and marginalised groups are consulted in forums and decision-making processes, they are usually perceived as subjects for intervention rather than as active participants with valuable contributions to solving problems. Recent world summits have failed to muster the imagination and ambition required to tackle the pressing problems of the world, offering largely conventional approaches and technocratic tinkering.

Moreover, it is critical to revisit the notion that governments have a duty to provide only a minimum of security and protection against social deprivation, while securing a competitive arena for the market.

Recommendation: Urgently review modalities with regard to civil society and community participation in United Nations processes and decision making at the local, regional and national level. Additional efforts must be made to ensure that voices of vulnerable and marginalised groups are represented within United Nations processes.

2. Promoting measures and actions for participatory development and democratic governance including through civil society and social movements at grassroots, local and national levels

Governments have a responsibility to create platforms and forums at community, local and national levels where civil society, representatives of governments, community leaders and other groups, such as indigenous groups, can discuss policy before formulation and implementation. In such cases all actors can provide buy-in before policies are implemented, thereby making use of the vast experiences and knowledge of civil society garnered from its work with communities, individuals and groups.

Participatory development and democratic governance cannot be fully realised either at local, national or international levels unless states and decision-makers ensure that civil society, including social movements and grassroots organisations, has the space, resources and capacity to fully carry out their respective roles.

Currently, in democratic as well as authoritarian regimes, citizens and civil society organisations continue to experience pushback by state and non-state actors who use legal and extra-legal means to intimidate or harm civil society personnel and human rights and political activists to deter them from carrying out their work.

The internet, mobile telephones and social media now play a critical role in catalysing civic participation. Nevertheless, efforts to mobilise citizens are constrained by actions by governments to restrict internet freedom by censoring websites, and through the promulgation of laws restricting access to and distribution of specific information.

A number of governments continue to abuse their control of infrastructure to limit access to controversial internet content, institute country-wide filtering and surveillance systems or at critical political junctures intentionally reduce the speed of connection and in some cases completely shut down internet connections. Such actions by governments severely constrain the activities of civil society and limit their scope and impact on the ground.

A pressing issue for civil society is the need to build broad-based collaborations with newly mobilised citizens: the challenge is to sustain momentum and a sense of a community of ideas and practice, and of continuing the globalisation of currents of mutual inspiration between protest movements in different contexts.

There is also the urgent need to develop and increase the capacities of indigenous, youth and women's groups and leaders to enable them present a strong voice in development processes at national levels.

Recommendation: Ensure an 'enabling environment' for civil society in line with international human rights standards. At a minimum, the following rights should be guaranteed: freedom of association, freedom of expression, the right to operate free from unwarranted state interference; the right to communicate and cooperate, the right to seek and secure funding, and the state's duty to protect. Additional efforts should be made by the United Nations to ensure monitoring and implementation of the above guarantees.

3. Enhancing a globally enabling environment for development

An enabling environment for development needs to be fostered, including through the international finance system, which should support sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth, sustainable development and hunger and poverty eradication in developing countries, while allowing for coherent mobilisation of all sources of financing for development.

The blurring of boundaries and the receding of sovereignty and territorial integrity of most states now call for new and concerted approaches in solving the challenges facing humanity. It is now

urgent to adopt development strategies which centre around the needs and aspirations of citizens around the world and enable them to benefit from growth and prosperity in their countries.

A heavy focus on the militarisation of aid, particularly to governments deemed to be of strategic importance to rich and powerful countries, points to the politicisation of development cooperation policies and undermines international commitments to tackle poverty and inequality. Impoverished communities should be the target of international financial assistance; the strategy of some governments to re-direct aid to countries in crises, conflict or emergencies based on their strategic calculations leaves large numbers of poor people without much needed assistance.

Moreover, civil society and local communities around the world need the space, resources and capacities to play their full complement of roles – that of ensuring that all voices are heard in the development of national plans and budgets, particularly the voices of those who are the stated beneficiaries for those plans.

The current global economic crisis is expected to reduce capital inflows to developing countries through negative impacts on foreign direct investments, official development assistance and receipt of remittances from diaspora populations. Yet the crisis presents an opportunity to re-balance the equation between state, market and civil society.

Equal opportunities must be provided to all individuals and nations to enable them benefit from development solidarity that distributes the costs and burdens of global challenges fairly in accordance with basic principles of equity and social justice.

Inequality across the world is growing, which demands a rethink of current financial systems and the manner in which international financial institutions operate. In particular, there is an urgent need to eliminate the current democratic deficit in international organisations by entrenching transparency, participation and accountability in their structures and operations with a view to redefining their relations with citizens around the world.

A reform of the international financial system should see human rights placed at the centre, development paradigms fundamentally redefined and democratic governance at every level from the very local to the very global ensured.

Recommendation: Efforts should be made to ensure that decisions regarding global financial affairs and trade relations which affect the world's population are taken within a transparent, unified and democratic framework of the United Nations rather than in exclusive spaces and groupings constructed by rich and powerful governments and their allies. Additionally, the United Nations must be engaged in efforts to review the functioning of international financial institutions and monitor their accountability to the international human rights framework.

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