

A Path Towards Inclusive (Water) Fora: Proactive Measures for Success

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This document addresses the significant barriers that Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) encounter in participating in international forums, including exclusion from agenda-setting, restricted access to information, and limited civic space. It outlines ideal scenarios for more inclusive, accessible, and safe environments at these events, and provides actionable recommendations to achieve these goals. The role of the Dutch government in supporting these efforts is also highlighted.

INTRODUCTION AND KEY CONTEXT

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are essential in linking local contexts to global goals, particularly in terms of environmental and social policies.¹ Their participation in international forums ensures diverse perspectives and more

effective outcomes, specifically in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).² However, especially grassroots and socio-environmental justice CSOs often face significant barriers, including harassment, exclusion, and intimidation at international conferences, which undermines their influence and participation.³

The People's Water Forum (PWF) in Bali, Indonesia, highlighted the urgent need to address the obstacles local and environmental CSOs face at (or in parallel to) international events.⁴ Incidents of harassment and intimidation were reported, including the disruption of pre-event discussions and the barring of UN Special Rapporteur Pedro Arrojo Agudo from entering the venue.⁵ The events at the PWF in Bali do not stand alone, but highlight just one example of the many

intimidations and restrictions that CSOs suffer at international conferences worldwide and that motivate the formation of this document. Additional examples and incident reports can be found in Annex A.

CURRENT BARRIERS, IDEAL SCENARIOS, AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

This section outlines the barriers faced by civil society, ideal scenarios for more inclusive forums, and key recommendations for achieving them, with guidance for the Dutch government's role. A more detailed version is provided in Annex B.

MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION AND INCLUSION IN AGENDA-SETTING

Current Barriers: CSOs are often excluded from agenda-setting processes, with governments and the private sector dominating discussions.

Ideal Scenario: CSOs are actively involved and can meaningfully contribute to the agenda-setting, ensuring balanced and representative outcomes.

Key recommendations:

- **Ensure CSO Involvement:** Advocate for the inclusion of CSOs in all preparatory meetings and agenda-setting processes.
- **Proactive Engagement:** Engage with CSOs well before conferences to incorporate their perspectives into the agenda.

- **Workshops and Presentations:** Organize workshops and presentations – directed towards organizers of conferences, embassies and other government officials – to emphasize the importance of civil society participation in international forums.

FREEDOM OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Current Barriers: Government-imposed censorship and restricted access to information hinder transparent participation.

Ideal Scenario: Unrestricted access to information, with transparent communication channels for all participants.

Key recommendations:

- **Public Awareness Initiatives:** Support initiatives that raise awareness about the importance of unrestricted information access at international events.
- **Engage with Host Governments:** Advocate for freedom of access to information by engaging with host governments.
- **Diffusion of Freely Accessible Information:** Ensure that all critical information and resources are distributed widely and made freely available to all participants before, during, and after the event.

ACCESSIBILITY OF THE EVENT

Current Barriers: High registration fees, accommodation costs, and visa issues disproportionately impacting grassroots organizations and local CSOs from the Global South, limiting their participation.

Ideal Scenario: An approach based on equity is taken, offering affordable fees, transparent sponsorships, and simplified visa procedures to members of CSOs and grassroots organizations.

Key recommendations:

- **Support Affordable Participation:** Advocate for reduced registration fees and establish robust sponsorship mechanisms to support attendance from grassroots CSOs from the Global South.
- **Engage with Dutch Embassies:** Collaborate with host countries and embassies to streamline visa processes and offer logistical support to CSOs attending international events.
- **Inclusive Locations:** Advocate for international conferences and forums to be hosted in a diverse range of locations, including those in the Global South and ensure the uphold of human rights.
- **Breaking language barriers:** Advocate for the provision of all key documents, presentations, and discussions in multiple languages to maximize accessibility for participants from diverse backgrounds, especially those from the Global South.

SAFE CIVIC SPACE AND FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

Current Barriers: Security measures and political pressures often restrict civic spaces at international events, limiting freedom of assembly, protest, and expression.

Ideal Scenario: Safe and open spaces for civic engagement, with strong protections for CSOs, activists and journalists.

Key recommendations:

- **NGO Representative:** Appoint an NGO representative or issue manager within the Dutch government to liaise with civil society and step-in to support the CSOs where necessary.
- **Plan B:** Develop contingency plans to support CSOs facing reprisals, including providing emergency legal support and temporary safe spaces.
- **Freedom of Assembly:** Work with host governments and event organizers to ensure that protests and demonstrations are respected and protected. Monitor and report on the safety and treatment of civil society participants.

ANNEX

ANNEX A: ADDITIONAL INCIDENT DESCRIPTIONS AND MOTIVATIONS FOR ACTION

People's Water Forum (PWF)

The incidents at the People's Water Forum (PWF) in Denpasar, Bali, Indonesia, highlight the urgent need to address and act on the barriers and challenges faced by civil society organizations (CSOs) at international conferences. This document is motivated by the events that occurred during the PWF from May 21-23, 2024, where reports of harassment, intimidation, and violent disruptions underscored the obstacles that CSOs often encounter.ⁱ

During the PWF, reports of disruption of events and harassment and intimidation of activists and organizers were reported. Ahead of the People's Water Forum, the Bintang Gana Foundation (PWF national committee) faced harassment from authorities, including police and military visits, social media hacks, and surveillance of activists. On May 20th, a pre-event discussion was violently disrupted by the Patriot Garuda Nusantara group, and on the 21st of May, UN Special Rapporteur Pedro Arrojo Agudo was prevented from entering the venue by heavy security, forcing him and the PWF representatives to leave.ⁱⁱ

The events at the PWF in Bali do not stand alone, but highlight just one example of the many intimidations and

restrictions that CSOs suffer at international conferences worldwide.

Freedom of speech and assembly

For example, at COP27 in Egypt in 2022, international and Egyptian civil society groups endured severe restrictions imposed by the authorities, hindering participation and leading to the arrests of journalists, activists, human rights defenders, and members of the LGBTQI+ community.ⁱⁱⁱ While the fossil fuel industry was largely represented at COP28 in Dubai in 2023, protests for human and environmental rights in the UAE were shut down.^{iv}

The fear for arrests and intimidations at these conferences or in their proximity, can prevent activists and civil society representatives from even attending. Additionally, they often face intimidation beforehand. For instance, during a Green Climate Fund (GCF) board meeting in Bahrain, key representatives were detained for the entire week to prevent interactions with the board. One leader from the Philippines feared arrest and did not attend, highlighting the risks faced by civil society participants even prior to conferences.^v

Free press and access of civic space

Regarding the upcoming COP29 in Azerbaijan, the government has already been accused of cracking down on media and civil society activism before hosting crucial UN climate talks. Human Rights Watch has documented at least 25

instances of journalists and activists being arrested or sentenced in the past year, almost all of whom remain in custody.v

Notably, these incidents are not limited to countries considered repressive regimes. At COP25 in Poland in 2019, Polish authorities restricted activist entry and conducted intrusive searches.vii Similarly, at COP26 in Glasgow, civil society members struggled to access negotiation rooms both online and in person, and entry visas were declined or not processed in timeviii. At COP25 in 2019 in Madrid, protesters highlighting the urgency of climate actionix and peace were removed from the venue.x

International water conferences

The issue extends beyond UN climate conferences. Within the 2030 SDG's, the UN acknowledged the importance of critically examining the global state of water resources. Consequently, it designated the years 2018 to 2028 as the "International Decade for Action on Water for Sustainable Development"xi. In this regard, the inclusion of civil society representatives and local actors in international water and sanitation policy development is crucial.xii Yet, the 10th World Water Forum (WWF) and the World Water Week in Stockholm highlight significant shortcomings in supporting civil society participation: high registration fees, lack of sponsorship opportunities, and insufficient transparency in financial support mechanisms are only a few examples that prevent many CSOs from attending.

ANNEX B: BARRIERS, IDEAL SCENARIOS AND RECOMMENDATIONS - DETAILED

These incidents exemplify the broader issue of intimidation and restrictions that civil society is currently suffering at international conferences and in the global political landscape. From the many issues and challenges at international events and fora, we can learn that proactive measures are essential for success. Instead of assuming that things will go smoothly and work out on their own, we must recognize that careful planning and foresight are key. The prevailing assumption that events will naturally be well-organized and inclusive for civil society is almost always inaccurate and unwise. By anticipating potential challenges from the outset, we can better prepare and respond effectively.

Below, we outline the current barriers faced by civil society and the ideal scenarios of how a more inclusive, accessible, and safe environment at international forums would look like. Moreover, we make recommendations and points of action that can support the way towards achieving these ideal scenarios, also highlighting how the Dutch government can support this process.

ANNEX B-1: MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION AND INCLUSION IN AGENDA-SETTING

Current Barriers: International events are often dominated by governments and the private sector, which have the

resources, capacities, and connections to shape the agenda and secure session proposals. Civil society groups, marginalized communities, and smaller organizations are frequently excluded from the preparatory process, limiting their ability to influence the agenda and contribute to balanced discussions. During the conference, presentations and speaking time for civil society is often limited and underrepresented in comparison to private sector and government-led sessions.

Ideal Scenario: Civil society and grassroots organizations are actively invited to contribute to both the agenda-setting and participatory processes. Preparatory meetings are inclusive, offering equal opportunities for all participants to voice their perspectives and influence the conference agenda. Conferences are structured to ensure a balanced representation of all stakeholders, with interactive sessions designed to amplify the voices of those who are often underrepresented, ensuring that discussions are inclusive and reflective of diverse perspectives.

Concrete Recommendations for Action

- **Ensure Civil Society Involvement in Preparatory Meetings:** Advocate for and ensure the inclusion of CSOs in preparatory meetings before international conferences. The Dutch government can take inspiration from initiatives like the Butterfly Effect,

facilitating direct communication between CSOs and forum co-chairs by writing pre-conference letters.

- **Proactive Engagement:** The Dutch government should identify CSOs planning to attend a forum and engage with them well in advance. This way, clear agreements to understand their needs, barriers and goals can be made. Moreover, by identifying CSOs that would like to attend, a more concrete plan regarding the agenda-setting process can be made. Advocate for freedom of access to information by engaging with host governments.
- **Workshops and Presentations:** Organize workshops and presentations that emphasize the importance of civil society participation in international forums. These workshops could be directed towards co-organizers and chairs of conferences, as well as embassy and government officials – informing them about the role they can play in facilitating inclusion and participation.

ANNEX B-2: FREEDOM OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Current Barriers: Government-imposed censorship and the blocking of websites restrict access to critical information. This includes not only the suppression of news media and human rights platforms but also limits on digital communications that are vital for event preparation and CSO engagement. Such restrictions prevent

effective dissemination of information and hinder transparent participation in international forums.

Ideal Scenario: Governments and event organizers ensure unrestricted access to information by refraining from censorship and blocking websites. Transparent communication channels are established, providing all participants with timely and comprehensive information about the event and related issues. Online resources, including news media and human rights platforms, are freely accessible, allowing for informed participation and engagement.

Concrete Recommendations for Action

- **Engage with Host Governments:** The Dutch government should advocate for freedom of access to information by engaging with host governments to ensure they refrain from censorship and provide open internet access during international forums.
- **Public Awareness Initiatives:** The Dutch government can support initiatives that raise awareness about the importance of unrestricted information access at international events, ensuring that all participants, including civil society, can engage fully.
- **Diffusion of Freely Accessible Information:** Gather all necessary information and collaborate with governments and CSO's to make the information accessible to all participants. The Dutch government

can take initiative to establish a centralized (online) platform where all relevant documents, reports, and resources are uploaded and made freely accessible.

- **Breaking Language Barriers:** The Dutch government should take a leading role in advocating for multilingual support at international forums. This includes ensuring that all key documents, presentations, and discussions are translated into multiple languages, and that real-time interpretation services are provided during sessions. The government could also support the development of centralized platforms where translated materials are accessible before, during, and after events.

ANNEX B-2: FREEDOM OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Current Barriers: Conferences in the Global North impose additional costs and visa procedures for participants from the Global South, making attendance difficult. Registration fees for events can be prohibitively expensive, and there is often a lack of prompt and transparent budget allocation to cover travel, accommodation, visas, and insurance.

Ideal Scenario: Events are hosted in geographically diverse locations, with considerations for the ease of access for participants from both the Global North and South. Registration fees are kept affordable, with significant discounts for CSOs, particularly from the Global South.

A well-organized sponsorship mechanism is in place, providing guaranteed funding for travel, accommodation, visas, and insurance, ensuring equitable participation across all regions.

Concrete Recommendations for Action

- **Support Affordable Participation:** Advocate for reduced registration fees for CSOs, especially those from developing countries. The Dutch government should also support the creation of sponsorship mechanisms that guarantee funding for travel, accommodation, visas, and insurance.
- **Engage with Dutch Embassies:** Collaborate with Dutch embassies in host countries to provide timely information, facilitate visa approvals, and offer logistical support to CSOs attending international events. The Dutch government can send official communications to ensure smoother visa processes for participants from diverse geographical regions.
- **Advocate for Diverse and Respectful Locations:** The Dutch government should advocate for international conferences and forums to be hosted in a diverse range of locations, including those in the Global South. Additionally, it should ensure that these locations are selected based on criteria that respect and uphold human rights.

ANNEX B-4: SAFE CIVIC SPACE AT THE CONFERENCE

Current Barriers: Freedom of speech

and assembly are often compromised at international conferences, with activists and journalists facing reprisals such as asset freezes, travel bans, and intimidation. Freedom of assembly is restricted, with protests confined to specific government-designated areas, limiting the ability of civil society to express dissent.

Ideal Scenario: Authorities and event organizers ensure a safe and open civic space for all participants, including activists and journalists. Protest spaces are freely accessible, allowing for peaceful demonstrations without confinement to government-designated areas. Security measures respect the privacy and rights of all attendees, fostering an environment where civil society can freely express and advocate for their causes.

Concrete Recommendations for Action

- **Appoint an NGO Representative/ Issue Manager:** Consider appointing an NGO representative or issue manager within the Dutch government to liaise with civil society, ensuring their concerns and priorities are reflected in the conference agenda and are ready to step-in when there is an issue at hand.
- **Develop a Contingency Action Plan:** The Dutch government should establish ongoing communication with CSOs to prepare for potential challenges related to freedom of speech and assembly. Develop a

concrete action plan that outlines the steps to support CSOs in case of reprisals or other threats – “Let’s keep each other informed!” “What will we do if things go wrong?”

- **Advocate for Safe Civic Space:** The Dutch government can use its diplomatic influence to advocate for the protection of civic space at international conferences, ensuring that activists and journalists can participate without fear of intimidation or reprisal.
- **Support Freedom of Assembly:** Advocate for host governments to provide accessible protest spaces and respect the freedom of assembly. The Dutch government can monitor the situation on the ground and offer support to civil society groups that wish to engage in peaceful demonstrations.

The above-described incidents exemplify the broader issue of intimidation and restrictions that civil society is currently suffering at international conferences and in the global political landscape. From the many issues and challenges at international events and fora, we can learn that proactive measures are essential for success. Instead of assuming that things will go smoothly and work out on their own, we must recognize that careful planning and foresight are key. The prevailing assumption that events will naturally be well-organized and inclusive for civil society is almost always inaccurate and unwise. By anticipating

potential challenges from the outset, we can better prepare and respond effectively.

ANNEX C: POST-FORUM COMMUNICATION AND FUTURE PREPARATIONS

- **Feedback and Incident Reporting:** Provide comprehensive feedback and, if necessary, incident reports to embassies, government officials, and the co-organizers or chairpersons of the conferences. This should include a critical assessment of who was represented at the table versus those who remain at risk but were not included in the discussions.
- **Assessment of Outcomes and Commitments:** Collaborate with CSOs to provide a critical assessment of the outcomes and commitments made at the forums. Push for more binding, structured, and systemic goals, focusing on the depth and foresight of agreements rather than merely the number of commitments and pledges.
- **Advocacy for Greater Inclusiveness:** Advocate for increased inclusiveness in future events, emphasizing the importance of involving a broader range of CSOs in the planning stages. By ensuring diverse voices are heard early on, future conferences can better address the needs and concerns of all stakeholder.
- **Location and Funding Considerations:** Communicate the need to organize more events in the Global South and to allocate sufficient

funds for conferences hosted in the Global North. This approach will help alleviate the logistical and financial burdens on participants from the Global South and promote more equitable access to international forums.



- 1 <https://www.un.org/ht/desa/giving-civil-society-voice-united-nations>
- 2 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09640568.2023.2205571>
- 3 Letter of the Butterfly Effect, 2024
- 4 <https://www.devex.com/news/how-indonesia-s-water-conferences-went-down-the-drain-107761>
- 5 <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/7046-indonesia-disruption-of-civil-society-water-forum-an-attack-on-freedoms->
- I <https://www.devex.com/news/how-indonesia-s-water-conferences-went-down-the-drain-107761>
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- III <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/jun/12/azerbaijan-accused-of-media-crackdown-before-hosting-cop29>
- IV <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/28/cop27-qa>
- V https://www.democracynow.org/2022/10/21/naomi_klein_cop27_un_egypt_greenwashing
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- VII <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/07/poland-denies-entry-environmental-activists-attend-climate-talks>
- VIII Daan Robben, personal communication, 2024
- IX <https://www.devex.com/news/civil-society-groups-removed-from-cop25-for-protesting-sleepwalking-negotiations-96213>
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