



Promoting an open and inclusive public sphere

At a glance



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An open and inclusive public sphere for a stronger social contract

In the report, ‘Our Common Agenda’, the UN Secretary-General notes “a growing disconnect between people and the institutions that serve them, with many feeling left behind and no longer confident that the system is working for them, an increase in social movements and protests and an ever-deeper crisis of trust fomented by a loss of shared truth and understanding.”

“A frayed social contract”, stresses the Secretary-General, “is at the heart of [these challenges]” and therefore “a renewed social contract, anchored in human rights” will be needed to overcome them.

It is hard to overstate the importance of a strong social contract for the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Clearly, the ideal of peace with justice and inclusion, which is so central to SDG 16, will not be attainable as long as people do not see themselves represented in the basic arrangements underpinning their societies. But the relevance of the social contract for the SDGs does not end with Goal 16.

Many, perhaps most, of the transformations that are called for by the Agenda 2030 – from the reduction of inequalities to the

energy transition – will require broad-based citizen¹ mobilization. However, as noted in the 2023-2024 Human Development Report, ‘Breaking the Gridlock: Reimagining cooperation in a polarized world’, it is difficult to imagine how such mobilization would be possible, in any society, without a strong sense of shared destiny.

In order to lay the foundations for stronger social contracts, it is necessary to improve the quality of the public sphere, understood as the complex network of spaces in which the social contract is envisioned, negotiated and continuously reevaluated.

To this end, two questions are of particular relevance: what systems need to be in place to ensure that all citizens can meaningfully participate in public debate on issues that matter to them? And what can be done to promote a public debate that is based on a commitment to facts and reason as well as respect for others? Only by addressing these two questions can communities develop social contracts that are, at the same time, broadly owned and fit to withstand the challenges of today’s world.

1 Here and elsewhere in the document, the term ‘citizen’ is not used in the legal sense of somebody holding the nationality of a certain country, but rather, in a broader sense, to denote a member of a certain polity, who may or may not be a citizen in a strictly legal sense.

What is the public sphere?

The public sphere is the domain of social life in which people come together, as members of a collectivity, to articulate visions of the public good.

A dialogue-based understanding of the public sphere

The public sphere materializes in a wide array of spaces - from the most local (the kitchen table or the village square) to the most formal (the halls of academia or the pages of newspapers). Such spaces may be structured very differently in different contexts and continuously evolve over time (as seen, for instance, in the increasing importance of the Internet as a space of public deliberation). However, in each of them, people engage in various forms of communicative action to argue the merits of their opinions, rebut perspectives that they consider misguided and sometimes reach agreement as to what should be regarded as advancing the 'greater good' of the communities to which they belong. In this sense the public sphere can be understood, fundamentally, as an expression of the human capacity for dialogue.

What is an open and inclusive public sphere?

A public sphere can be considered open and inclusive when it allows for the meaningful participation of all members of society, without discrimination. In practice, this involves a number of conditions, which are described in the following section.

The rationale for an open and inclusive public sphere

An open and inclusive public sphere is not only a condition for the realization of the right to participate in the conduct of public affairs. It is also an enabler of peace and development. Across development contexts, openness and inclusiveness in the public sphere have proven to be powerful drivers of accountable and responsive governance. At the same time, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that countries with more open and inclusive governance arrangements are better equipped to deal with social tensions before they are mobilized into violence. Furthermore, empirical evidence shows that key features of an open and inclusive public sphere are associated with stronger social protection systems, less poverty and more equitably distributed growth.

For more information

The UNDP paper 'What is an open and inclusive public sphere? A framing note' offers a detailed theoretical framework for work on an open and inclusive public sphere with reference to relevant scholarship on this topic.

Realizing an open and inclusive public sphere

Based on the definitions provided above, the realization of an open and inclusive public sphere is seen as contingent on a number of conditions.



Spaces of civic engagement

It is essential, first of all, for people to have genuine opportunities for civic engagement. This, in turn, is premised on the existence of enabling normative frameworks based on the full recognition of the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly, together with adequate venues for participation and dialogue (among citizens and between citizens and the state) as well as a vibrant civil society.



Cultural and educational enablers

Institutional mechanisms aimed at ensuring access to participation opportunities and quality information can only be viable if embedded in a culture that values citizens' active engagement. At the same time, in order for these mechanisms to thrive, it is necessary for people to regularly engage with them in constructive ways which are grounded, among other things, in civic education as well as media and information literacy.



Access to quality information

Additionally, it is key for people to have access to the information resources that they need in order to meaningfully engage in public life. This requires, in turn, effective public communication and transparency on the part of the state as well as a free, independent and pluralistic media, together with adequate mechanisms to respond to information pollution and fragmentation.



Equality in participation

Finally, for the public sphere to be genuinely open and inclusive, it is necessary to have in place dedicated mechanisms that enable, protect and promote the full participation in public life of population groups experiencing discrimination. These mechanisms should take into account not only legal, cultural and practical barriers, but also capacity differentials resulting from histories of marginalization.

Consequently, this section will outline how UNDP can contribute to an open and public sphere through integrated work in four priority areas:

- Nurturing spaces for civic engagement
- Enabling access to quality information
- Culture and education for constructive engagement
- Promoting equal participation in the public sphere

Key programmatic entry points under each of these priority areas are outlined in the diagram provided in the next section

Priority areas of work and programmatic entry points

Nurturing spaces for civic engagement	Enabling access to quality information	Culture and education for constructive engagement	Promoting equal participation in the public sphere
Regulatory framework for civic space	Public communication and transparency	Transformational leadership for openness and inclusion	Addressing legal barriers
Citizen participation infrastructure	Media development	Fit-for-purpose civic education	Addressing cultural barriers
Facilitation of dialogue processes	Addressing information pollution	Promoting a culture of constructive engagement	Promoting accessibility
Civil society support infrastructure	Addressing information fragmentation	Media and information literacy	Dedicated capacity building

The framework presented in this document does not seek to lay out a detailed programme of work, but rather identify potential strategic interventions based on UNDP’s comparative advantage and an assessment of global challenges and opportunities. As such, it is intended as a source of orientation for more detailed processes of programme design, which will necessarily need to be informed by context-specific analyses of barriers and enablers.

Also, while the proposed entry points are structured vertically, by priority areas, for presentation purposes, the different workstreams should not be regarded as separate silos. In fact, in most cases, actual programming will be the result of a horizontal ‘mixing-and-matching’ process across themes within the framework of a portfolio approach, as further described in the following section.

For more information

The UNDP paper ‘Promoting an open and inclusive public sphere. Programmatic options’ offers a detailed guidance on all of the above entry points, including examples of interventions undertaken by UNDP Country Offices around the world.

A portfolio approach to promoting an open and inclusive public sphere

Example 1. Designing participation mechanisms

CIV SPA	ACC INF	EDU CUL	EQU PAR
Participation mechanisms			Addressing stereotypes
		Awareness raising	
			Targeted training

An initiative to promote participation in policymaking may combine the design of participation mechanisms with awareness-raising activities and targeted training (for instance around the budgeting process). This could be complemented by actions aimed at addressing cultural barriers (such as gender-based stereotypes affecting women’s participation).

Example 2. Promoting legislative reform

CIV SPA	ACC INF	EDU CUL	EQU PAR
NGO regulation		Political leadership	
	Media regulation		

An initiative on regulatory frameworks may support the simultaneous review of legislation regulating the NGO and media sectors as part of a comprehensive reform package. This could be combined with advocacy and dialogue (for instance with members of parliament) to foster support for the envisage reforms and encourage transformational leadership.

A portfolio approach to promoting an open and inclusive public sphere (cont.)

Example 3. Protecting information integrity

CIV SPA	ACC INF	EDU CUL	EQU PAR
	Dialogue on disinfo		
Civil society monitoring		Info literacy campaigns	

Policy dialogue with political parties, media and other stakeholder on preventing disinformation in electoral contexts may be combined with media and information literacy campaigns for the general public as well as support for a network of civil society organization engaged in monitoring media coverage of the electoral process and as well as information flows online.

Example 4. Addressing discrimination

CIV SPA	ACC INF	EDU CUL	EQU PAR
			Remove legal discrimination
	Rights-based reporting		
Dialogue opportunities Strengthen organizations			

An initiative aimed at reforming legislation that discriminates against an historically marginalized group could be complemented by strengthening the organizations representing the discriminated group, creating occasions for dialogue between this group and other population segments, and building media capacity for more accurate and rights-based reporting