Promoting an open and inclusive public sphere

A framing note
Acknowledgements

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Table of Contents

Introduction
- An open and inclusive public sphere for a stronger social contract 2
- Objectives of this note 3

Part 1. Conceptual framing
- 1.1 A dialogue-based understanding of the public sphere 4
- 1.2 Defining openness and inclusiveness in the public sphere 12

Part 2. Rationale
- 2.1 Why do we need an open and inclusive public sphere? 14
- 2.2 Mandate for work on an open and inclusive public sphere 19
- 2.3 UNDP's value proposition 21
The current state of global affairs leaves little doubt that governance systems around the world are facing significant levels of strain. Multiple surveys over the past several years, have consistently documented growing disenchantment with public institutions, while the number and intensity of protest events have increased in all regions. In many cases, people’s expressions of dissatisfaction have been met with repressive responses, often resulting in heightened internal tensions and deepening international instability. At the same time, the quality of public debate has been deteriorating, as many countries dangerously inch towards a situation that has been described by some as “post-truth politics.”

Reflecting upon these trends, the United Nations Secretary-General notes that “[t]here is 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 Agenda 2030 – from the reduction of

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1 See, e.g., the results of the 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer.
4 For instance, the Deliberative Democracy Index of the Varieties of Democracies institute, which expresses the extent to which decision-making in a country is based on a public debate that is rational, open and respectful of different points of view has fallen by 10 percent since 2011 (considering the simple average worldwide) and almost 30 percent (considering the average weighted by the size of the population of each country).
inequalities to the energy transition – will require broad-based citizen6 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 re-evaluated. 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.

Objectives of this note

Within the Governance Signature Solution of its 2022-2025 Strategic Plan, UNDP has committed to promote an open and inclusive public sphere as a condition for informed and constructive civic engagement.7 This commitment is further expanded in ‘Governance for People and Planet (G4PP): A Global Programme to Promote Accountable, Inclusive and Effective Governance’, which seeks to “empower people as positive agents of change in an open and inclusive public sphere.”8

The present document supports the work envisaged in UNDP’s Strategic Plan as well as the G4PP programme framework by clarifying the concept of ‘public sphere’, providing operational definitions of openness and inclusiveness as they relate to this concept, articulating the normative and instrumental case for an open and inclusive sphere, and outlining UNDP’s value proposition in this field.

A second document, ‘Promoting an open and inclusive public sphere: Programmatic options’, complements the content of this note with guidance on specific interventions that could be undertaken by UNDP Country Offices around the world.

6 Here and elsewhere in the document, the term ‘citizen’ is not used in the legal sense of a person 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.

7 Integrated results and resources framework Output 2.4, especially Target 2.4.5.

8 Outcome 2, especially Outputs 2.1 and 2.2.
Conceptual framing

1.1 A dialogue-based understanding of the public sphere

A constant of human interaction, across space and time, is the reliance on collaboration as a strategy to solve complex challenges and achieve common objectives. Often, the goals animating this collaboration reflect the interests of specific sub-groups within a certain community and may, therefore, differ from, or even compete with, the goals of other sub-groups. However, in any community, there is a set of interests that are, in principle, shared by all members and that, as such, play a special role in structuring social life. Examples of such interests include, for instance, the protection of individuals’ safety, the responsible utilization of natural resources available to the community, and the effective preservation of the knowledge created across generations.

This set of shared interests can be referred to as the ‘public good’.9

For the purposes of the present note, the ‘public sphere’ may be defined as the domain of social life in which people come together, as members of a collectivity, to articulate visions of the public good.10 This domain materializes into 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 the newspapers).11 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

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9 ‘Public good’ is used here in the sense of ‘common good’ or ‘common interest’ and not with the meaning that is normally attributed to this term in economic theory, where a public good is defined as a good that is both non-excludable and non-rivalrous. A comprehensive overview of different philosophical interpretations of the concepts of public good can be found in Hussain, Waheed, ‘The Common Good’, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

10 The conceptual framing offered in this section draws in part on the body of work developed by Hannah Arendt in The Human Condition (1959) and Jurgen Habermas in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962) as well as Theory of Communicative Action (1981). At the same time, an effort was made to reflect successive contributions and critiques. These include: work on the role of diversity and power relations in shaping public sphere dynamics (especially Nancy Fraser’s Rethinking the Public Sphere and Michael Warner’s Publics and Counterpublics), work on the transnationalization of the public sphere in the network society (see for instance Manuel Castells’ The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance), and work interrogating the relevance of the concept of public sphere for the Global South (see for instance Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ Public sphere and epistemologies of the South).

11 In The public sphere: An encyclopedia article Habermas notes that “[a] portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body.”
communities to which they belong. In this sense, the public sphere can be understood, fundamentally, as an expression of the human capacity for dialogue.

In any society, the definition of the public good will always be a contested matter. People may easily agree with the abstract notion of a privileged class of shared interests that should be prioritized by the community. However, in practice, they will often differ on what precisely should be considered as belonging to this class of interests, or how these interests should be pursued. For instance, while the members of a community may concur on the need for an ‘equitable’ distribution of income, individual understandings of what precisely constitutes such a distribution are likely to vary significantly. Or, to cite another example, people who are equally supportive of ‘sustainability’ in principle may have highly divergent views on the best ways to pursue economic prosperity in the present while protecting the rights of future generations. In this context, ‘public authority’ can be understood as a mechanism to mediate and, where necessary, adjudicate disagreements over the public good, as well as a device to ensure compliance with provisions that have been identified as serving the collective interest.

Who holds public authority?

As a first approximation, we can consider the domain of public authority as coextensive with the institutions of the state. However, a full appreciation of governance dynamics requires a recognition that, in multiple contexts, a range of non-state institutions play roles that are akin to the exercise of public authority. This can be seen, for instance, in situations of limited statehood where armed groups control portions of a country’s territory, but also where private companies effectively regulate public spaces (as in the case of private ownership of media platforms) or with respect to a range of social institutions that, while not holding legal authority, carry significant moral authority (for instance, as a result of religious or ancestral traditions) regarding matters of public concern.

12 Of course, people may (and often do) engage in the public sphere to advance group-specific interests (including by demanding measures that would negatively affect the interest of other groups). However, because of the specific nature of the public sphere, such efforts need to be accompanied by a plausible theory of how advancing the interests of a specific group would eventually serve the common good. As John Rawls puts it in A theory of justice (1971): "[...] it is a political convention of a democratic society to appeal to the common interest. No political party publicly admits to pressing for legislation to the disadvantage of any recognized social group." In this sense, the public good can also be conceptualized as a common frame of reference through which competing interests are evaluated or, as noted by Waleed Hussain (ibid.) "a shared standpoint for practical reasoning."

13 In fact, not only the content of the ‘public good’ will always be an object of contention, but also the boundaries between ‘public’ and ‘private’ and the very meaning of this distinction.
The public sphere and the state

The public sphere, as defined in this framing note, is a place of public debate, not public decision-making. It is different, therefore, from the spaces where public authority is exercised. Nevertheless, the relation with public authority is a foundational element of this domain.

Of course, much of the process of articulation of the public good that happens in the public sphere is not especially concerned with the exercise of public authority, but rather directed towards transforming social norms and behaviours. An association may, for instance, appeal to people’s universally shared aspiration to physical and moral integrity as a way to prevent gender-based violence. Another organization may promote the ideal that everyone should have free access to knowledge in order to enroll volunteers into the production of open-source content. Often, however, people will engage in the public sphere with the specific objective of influencing the conduct of the institutions that are vested with the authority of the state. For instance, they may want to provide inputs into the formulation of a new policy, or they may wish to give authorities feedback on the impact of an existing policy, together with recommendations on how it may need to be adjusted. In this sense, the public sphere can also be seen as a point of contact, or a bridge, between citizens and the state.

The public sphere and civil society

As a space of public debate in which people interact with each other and with the state to promote certain visions of the public good, the public sphere can be seen as an expression of the civil society domain. And of course, civil society organizations are important actors in the public sphere (although by no means the only ones). However, there is much more to civil society than the public sphere. Many actors operating within the civil society arena are not so much focused on the articulation of a vision of the public good as they are on realizing a vision that is regarded as already articulated. Moreover, many civil society organizations are not particularly concerned with the public good as such, but rather with promoting the wellbeing of their members, as for instance in the case of many forms of mutual assistance. The fact that these forms of associational life do not fall squarely under the concept of public sphere, as defined in this note, does not mean that they are not important to the public sphere. In fact, it is often in these spaces that the opinions, networks and projects which animate the public debate are formed.
The public sphere is, in principle, separate from the state. It has its roots in spaces that are, at least in part, outside of the state’s control, and it enables people to surface perspectives that are, at least potentially, alternative to those promoted by state institutions. Nonetheless, there are many ways in which the state structures the public sphere. State authorities regulate capabilities that are key to participation in public debate, including people’s ability to express themselves, associate and assemble. Furthermore, state institutions can have a significant impact on the public sphere by making available certain channels for input into public decision making, denying access to others, or setting specific conditions to access these channels. Critically, the safety of those engaging in the public sphere is very much dependent on the protection that is afforded to them (or not) by the organs of the state. And, finally, through its policies, the state shapes power relations within society that are reflected back into the public sphere and can significantly affect its dynamics.

The structuring role of the state vis-à-vis the public sphere creates a major conundrum. On the one hand, state action is necessary for the public sphere to thrive. On the other hand, control of the state institutions may be leveraged by specific social forces to co-opt or occupy the public sphere. For this reason, the extent to which a public sphere is (or should be) autonomous from the state and the ways in which this autonomy should be protected are often a matter of profound contention.

**The public sphere as a field of power contention**

While it is helpful to regard the public sphere as a space of dialogue, it is important to recognize at the same time that it represents a field of power contention. In a Gramscian sense, the public sphere is where hegemony is entrenched (through ‘manufactured consent’) but also where counter hegemonic projects are initiated. In a similar sense, Nancy Fraser refers to ‘counterpublics’ (often in the context of ‘subaltern counterpublics’). The broader point, however, is that the public sphere is not a neutral space but rather a field that reflects (and potentially reproduces or challenges) the power dynamics of society. In The Public Sphere in the Field of Power (2016), Craig Calhoun notes: “We need [...] to revisit the idea of a separation of spheres, recognizing that seeing these simply as semi-autonomous and distinct misses the extent to which they are mutually constituting. [...] Situating the public sphere within the larger field of power – contention over the shaping of shared institutions including the state – can help with this. We can recognize the ‘semi-autonomy’ of the public sphere but also that it is always subject to influences from other dimensions of ‘society’ and contending political and/or economic projects.”
If dialogue is the process through which people share partial perspectives in order to collectively build a deeper, more complete understanding of the world, then there cannot be dialogue without information. In fact, the quality of information available to different actors and the way it is distributed among them can have a very significant impact on the quality of dialogue processes. Only through accessing reliable information can people ensure that their conversation is actually grounded in reality. At the same time, a minimum core of shared information and commonly accepted facts is necessary for people to be able to engage in meaningful conversation.

To the extent that it is a space of dialogue, the public sphere is profoundly influenced by the nature of the information systems on which it rests. For this reason, if we are to understand the functioning of the public sphere, we need to understand its underlying information dynamics.

When it comes to the information flows of modern societies and their impact on the public sphere, a key issue is what has been described as the ‘information asymmetry’ between the various organs of the state on the one hand and the public on the other. Naturally, a lot of information on matters of public concern is controlled by state institutions: this information is often highly relevant to public debate, but may or may not be available for public consumption, and the conditions on which citizens may access it can vary significantly. Critically, who can have access this information may also vary significantly as a result of formal provisions, relations of power or informal networks of influence.
Another key issue is the role of the media, understood as the broad range of channels that carry news and public information. Media outlets are key enablers of public debate (in that they provide people with knowledge about a range of public matters) as well as one of the key spaces in which public debate plays out (to the extent that they host different expressions of public opinion). But they are also major actors within the public sphere, with the ability to significantly affect its outcomes. This is important in itself, but especially so when considering that media outlets are owned by specific individuals, corporations or institutions and therefore inherently represent specific interests and worldviews.

Digitalization and the emergence of a new information paradigm

A series of technological and economic transformations driven by digitalization are contributing to the emergence of a new information paradigm, with profound consequences for public life. The processes through which informational content is generated and distributed within social media, for instance, are very different from those that characterize traditional media. The same is true for the mechanisms through which content gains prominence and for issues of editorial responsibility. While digitalized information environments are seen by many as holding the promise of greater inclusion in public debate, there is also growing recognition that gaps in skills and access may result in new forms of exclusion. Furthermore, evidence shows that digital information landscapes may be more vulnerable to information manipulation and fragmentation, as well as the spread of hate speech. There is also evidence that digitalization and the rise of social media may be having a profoundly disruptive impact on the business model of legacy news media, with far-reaching implications for the journalistic profession.

See UNESCO, Media Development Indicators: A framework for assessing media development, for a more in-depth discussion of definitional issues and an overview of the complex role played by media within the governance system, available at: https://www.unesco.org/en/media-development-indicators.
As a consequence of the issues highlighted above, in any society, the way in which information is shared by public institutions with citizens and the configuration of the media sector should be regarded as critical determinants of the quality of public debate. Key aspects related to the first issue include through what channels and on what terms information held by state institutions is available to citizens. Critical factors related to the second issue include the regulatory frameworks that apply to the media sector, its ownership structure, economic incentives and professional culture, but also – and increasingly so – the role of social media versus that of news media as a source of information on matters of public concern.

**Beyond information: cultural and educational factors**

While the availability of quality information is undoubtedly a necessary requirement for constructive public debate, it should by no means be considered a sufficient condition. The way in which different people will relate to the same information – how they will make sense of it and the conclusions they will reach – will vary significantly depending on a range of personal and social factors. These factors include the information-decoding tools that are available to people (including the ability to examine critically preconstituted narratives), the worldviews to which they subscribe (including deeply-rooted notions of what constitutes a trustworthy source and what does not) and the networks of opinion makers on which they rely. For this reason, beyond the configuration of the information ecosystem, cultural and educational factors are also critical to understanding public sphere dynamics.
**Added value of the concept of public sphere**

Using the concept of public sphere as a tool for policy development and programme support in the area of governance has three main elements of added value, which are briefly summarized below.

- **Governance, power and the public good**
  
  There is no doubt that governance systems are about power. However, the practice of governance cannot be focused exclusively on maintaining power. The concept of public sphere draws attention to how governance systems, in order to be viable in the long run, need to deliver on a plausible notion of public good.

- **An integrated view of different governance spaces**
  
  Looking at governance systems through a public sphere lens highlights how key spaces of governance, such as the civil society domain and the media sector, interact with state institutions in a complex system of articulation, negotiation and definition of visions of the public good (and can therefore be understood as interdependent).

- **Linking participation and information dynamics**
  
  By emphasizing the central role of dialogue as a foundation of public life, the concept of public sphere more explicitly highlights the close linkages between participation and information dynamics and how they interact in creating the conditions for active citizenship.
1.2 Defining openness and inclusiveness in the public sphere

In his essay, *Civil society and the public sphere*, Craig Calhoun notes that “the public sphere is public first and foremost because it is open to all, not only in the sense that all can see and hear but also that all can participate and have a voice.” This framing note, which is based on a similar understanding, makes broad use of ideas of openness and inclusiveness as key features of the public sphere. Before proceeding further, therefore, it is important to clarify what is meant exactly by each of these terms.

An open public sphere

A public sphere is considered as ‘open’ for the purposes of this note when it does not impose unwarranted barriers to people’s participation, but rather offers conditions that enable meaningful civic engagement. This twofold requirement can, in turn, be broken down into four critical aspects.

**Absence of unwarranted barriers**

- **Openness as to the focus of engagement**

  Barring limited, legitimate restrictions, there are no a priori limitations as to what is an acceptable focus of engagement in the public sphere. People are able to safely express dissent and controversial opinions.

- **Openness as to the modalities of engagement**

  As a rule, people are able to engage beyond pre-constituted spaces of ‘invited’ participation convened by the state. They can assemble and associate on their own terms in order to pursue collective action.

**Enabling conditions**

- **Access to decision-making**

  Peoples’ expectations for voice and accountability are met by an open government. There are adequate venues to enable citizen input into policy development as well as ongoing feedback on the implementation and impact of policy.

- **Access to information**

  People have access to the informational resources they need in order to meaningfully engage in the public sphere. Transparency in the exercise of public authority is promoted and the integrity of the information ecosystem is protected.

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16 In this view, in order to be considered legitimate, constraints on people’s participation would need to be legal (i.e., provided for by law) as well as demonstrably necessary (i.e., required to respond to a pressing public need) and proportionate to the necessity they aim to address.
An inclusive public sphere guarantees all members of society equal access to opportunities for participation. It does not have group-specific ‘roadblocks’ or ‘fast-tracks’, and it includes systems to address differences in engagement capacity across groups. Three elements are especially relevant in relation to this concept:

- **Non-discrimination**
  People are not prevented from meaningfully engaging in the public sphere on the basis of their particular characteristics. They are able to claim the identity that they feel is their own in the public sphere and associate on the basis of this identity.

- **Accessibility**
  A deliberate effort is made to enable equal access to processes of public deliberation by designing these processes in ways that take into account the full diversity of human circumstances and by creating dedicated participation venues where needed.

- **Support systems**
  Adequate support systems are in place to address capacity gaps in the ability to engage in the public sphere, including gaps that may arise from and further entrench histories of marginalization and disadvantage.

Figure 1. Operationalizing openness and inclusiveness

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPENNESS</th>
<th>INCLUSIVENESS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absence of unwarranted barriers</td>
<td>Non-discrimination</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Openness as to the focus of engagement</td>
<td>Accessibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Openness as to the modalities of engagement</td>
<td>Support systems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enabling conditions</td>
<td>• Access to decision making</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Access to information</td>
<td>• Support systems</td>
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Rationale

2.1 Why do we need an open and inclusive public sphere?

The central idea of this guidance note is that, as the place in which visions of the public good are discussed and agreed on, the public sphere must be open and inclusive, or – in other words – allow for the meaningful and equal participation of all members of society. But why exactly are openness and inclusiveness so important for the public sphere? At least four considerations are relevant to this issue.

The right to participate in the conduct of public affairs

As established in Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and several other international and regional human rights legal instruments, people have a right to participate in the conduct of public affairs. This right has several dimensions, such as the right to vote and the right to access public service on general terms of equality, but – very importantly – it also includes the right to participate directly in different aspects of public life.

As clarified in the UN Human Rights Committee’s General Comment No. 25, people should be able to engage in the public sphere and shape the destiny of their communities not just as voters, holders of elective office or civil servants but also in a multitude of other ways, such as by “exerting influence through public debate and dialogue with their representatives or through their capacity to organize themselves.”

17 Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: “Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. Everyone has the right to equal access to public service in his country. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.” Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights reads as follows: “Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity, without any of the distinctions mentioned in article 2 and without unreasonable restrictions: a) to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives; b) to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors; c) to have access, on general terms of equality, to public service in his country.”
However, these forms of participation cannot come to fruition without enabling civic spaces based on the full realization of the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly. Nor are they possible without adequate access to information on public matters or mechanisms to eliminate discrimination. In other words, the right to participation in the conduct of public affairs cannot be fully realized without an open and inclusive public sphere.

Additionally, it is important to note that the freedoms of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly and association, as well as access to information, which are necessary conditions for the realization of the right to participate in the conduct of public affairs, are also rights in and of themselves as recognized in articles 19, 21 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.18

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18 Article 19: “Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice. The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary: a) for respect of the rights or reputations of others; b) for the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals.” Article 21: “The right of peaceful assembly shall be recognized. No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of this right other than those imposed in conformity with the law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order (ordre public), the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.” Article 22: “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of association with others, including the right to form and join trade unions for the protection of his interests. No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of this right other than those which are prescribed by law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order (ordre public), the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. This article shall not prevent the imposition of lawful restrictions on members of the armed forces and of the police in their exercise of this right. Nothing in this article shall authorize States Parties to the International Labour Organization Convention of 1948 concerning Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize to take legislative measures which would prejudice, or to apply the law in such a manner as to prejudice, the guarantees provided for in that Convention.”
More resilient societies

The social contract is a shared understanding, among the members of a society, of the basic arrangements that make their coexistence possible. It reflects the fundamental values that bind people together as well as the procedures that structure their interaction (including, very importantly, the norms that regulate the functioning of the state).

The terms of the social contract are not given once and for all, but rather reevaluated and renegotiated on a continuous basis. However, in order for a society to remain viable, it is essential that the social contract continues to be broadly owned. When people start to feel that their society is no longer based on common-ground principles, then the fabric of that society risks unraveling.

The public sphere plays a special role as the space in which the social contract is discussed, assessed and constantly reshaped. For this reason, its configuration can significantly affect the way in which the interests of different social groups are balanced. When the public sphere is open and inclusive, everyone has an opportunity to weigh in. As a result, the likelihood that the social contract will be a fair reflection of different aspirations increases. However, openness and inclusion are important even if they do not result in consensus.

People whose views have not been taken on board in public decision-making are more likely to remain engaged in public life when they feel that there is a plausible path for them to eventually bring their perspective to bear on collective deliberation. In contrast, where people feel systematically shut out of public debate by arrangements designed to exclude them, they will eventually disengage and lose the sense of connection with a society that does not appear to be interested in their views.

Conflict will always be a part of life. It is a natural expression of the diversity of values and interests of plural societies. Conflict can in fact be a significant source of social progress, as many examples in history demonstrate (from the battle for universal suffrage to the movement to end Apartheid to many others). What is critical is how conflict is managed. Evidence shows that countries with more open and inclusive governance arrangements are better-equipped to constructively deal with social tensions before they are mobilized into violence. For this reason, an open and inclusive public sphere can be seen as an investment in sustaining peace.
Responsive and accountable governance

An open and inclusive public sphere with active and informed civic engagement can bring about more responsive and accountable governance. It allows policy makers to obtain much richer citizen input than would be possible through elections alone, and it can serve as a counterbalance to the power of the state, ensuring ongoing scrutiny of the actions undertaken by public authorities. In contrast, constrained and opaque public environments create opportunities for elite capture and predatory governance.

A systematic literature review carried out by the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Sussex\textsuperscript{20} concludes that, while in theory the curtailing of civic space may provide the foundation for “developmental states” with a strong commitment to the public good, in practice it often “enables land and natural resource grabbing, or the abuse of labour or other rights of marginalized and disempowered groups.” Additional research\textsuperscript{21} has found that it is only in societies with open information arrangements that there is a strong correlation between people’s evaluation of public action and independent measures of government competency, impartiality and integrity. In fact, in societies with closed information arrangements, this correlation is almost non-existent.

As noted by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, “[a]t heart, democracy is about people. It is built on inclusion, equal treatment and participation.”\textsuperscript{22} In this sense, by creating the conditions for more responsive and accountable governance and by embodying a recognition that everyone’s voice matters, an open and inclusive public sphere holds the promise of a fuller, more meaningful form of democracy.


\textsuperscript{20} Hossain, N. et al. (2018). What does closing civic space mean for development? A literature review and proposed conceptual framework. IDS.


\textsuperscript{22} Message of UN Secretary-General António Guterres on the occasion of the International Day of Democracy, 15 September 2019.
Better development outcomes

There is empirical evidence that some of the defining features of an open and inclusive public sphere are associated with strong development outcomes.

A systematic literature review of academic papers since 2015 carried out for UNDP’s Oslo Governance Centre by the German Development Institute (Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik)\(^\text{23}\) finds strong support for the conclusion that progress on key aspects of SDG 16 (namely transparency, accountability, participation and inclusion) has enabling effects on key aspects of SDGs 1 and 10 (namely social protection, equality of opportunities and poverty reduction).

Among other things, the study notes that greater participation and accountability correspond to an increase in the poverty reduction effects of per capita GDP growth, while transparency can have a significant impact on the reduction of inequality, mainly via reduced corruption and more equitable provision of public goods.

These findings confirm research carried out by Naomi Hossain and Marjoke Oosterom,\(^\text{24}\) who, in a series of case studies, observed that restrictions on civic actors’ ability to operate freely resulted in the exclusion of some of the most marginalized and disempowered groups in society (such as the rural poor, racialized, indigenous or minority groups) from poverty and hunger reduction programmes.

The study commissioned by the Oslo Governance Center also maps a number of causal pathways. While these are very complex and involve multiple feedback loops, it should be noted that access to information (supported by a free, independent and pluralistic media sector) has a direct impact on both institutional transparency and public awareness. This awareness (especially when combined with higher levels of education) produces, in turn, more active and more impactful engagement in the public sphere.

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\(^{23}\) DIE and UNDP (2022). *Connections that matter: How the quality of governance institutions may be the booster shot we need to reduce poverty and inequality.*

2.2 Mandate for work on an open and inclusive public sphere

The whole-of-society approach embodied in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is fundamentally premised on an informed and engaged society, with full inclusion of all population segments. This is recognized not only in the Agenda’s Declaration, but also in several SDG targets, which are directly relevant to the issues addressed in this note.

Table 1. Selected SDG targets related to an open and inclusive public sphere

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>FORMULATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>By 2030 ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.10</td>
<td>Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The idea of an open and inclusive public sphere plays a central role in the UN Secretary-General’s report, ‘Our Common Agenda’, which places inclusion and participation, together with a society-wide commitment to evidence and reason, among the key foundations of a “renewed social contract fit for the twenty-first century.”

In addition, the creation of meaningful spaces of participation and the protection of the integrity of information systems are identified as priority areas by several other pieces of UN system-wide guidance. For instance, “public participation and civic space” is one of the pillars of the UN Secretary General’s Call to Action for Human Rights, which notes:

Society is stronger and more resilient when women and men can play a meaningful role in political, economic and social life, contributing to policy-making that affects their lives, including by accessing information, engaging in dialogue, expressing dissent and joining together to express their views.
Building on these frameworks, UNDP’s Strategic Plan 2022-2025 includes “an inclusive and open public sphere with expanded public engagement” as one of the key outputs under its Governance Signature Solution (Output 2.4). One of the key indicators under this output (indicator 2.4.5) is the “number of regional, national and sub-national initiatives, policies, and strategies to protect and promote: i) civil society to function in the public sphere and contribute to sustainable development; ii) inclusive spaces, mechanisms and capacities for public dialogue; and iii) access to reliable information on issues of public concern.”

Similarly, one of the outcomes of UNDP’s G4PP, is that “people are empowered as positive agents of change in an open and inclusive public sphere.” The outputs included under this outcome are to “support an open public sphere and informed civic engagement”, “promote inclusion in public decision-making” and “enhance the capacity of governance systems to be more inclusive, democratic and accountable.”
2.3 UNDP’s value proposition

UNDP has several elements of comparative advantage that can be leveraged to deliver strong programmatic results in the promotion of an open and inclusive public sphere. Some of them are briefly described below.

- **Relevant capacity**
  UNDP already has well-established capacity and workstreams addressing several of the themes covered by this note, including civic space, information integrity, human rights, women and young people’s participation and, more broadly, leaving no one behind. In addition, through the thought-leadership role played by corporate functions such as the Oslo-based UNDP Global Policy Center for Governance, the Accelerator Labs Network, the Strategic Innovation team and the Digital Office, UNDP has a unique capacity to address frontier and emerging issues.

- **Broad governance mandate**
  Due to its broad governance mandate, UNDP is able to leverage partnerships with a wide spectrum of governance institutions that are key to the realization of an open and inclusive public sphere. These include, among others, different parts of the executive branch, electoral management bodies, parliaments, institutions regulating the civil society and media sectors, national human rights institutions, constitutional courts, law enforcement authorities and local level administrations.

- **Cross-sectoral and integration role**
  UNDP works across several sectors and themes, including conflict prevention, economic policy, environmental sustainability, youth empowerment and gender equality – just to mention a few. As such, it is in a unique position to bring the principles of open and inclusive government as well as informed and constructive engagement into a multitude of areas. At the same time, thanks to its integrator role, UNDP can facilitate the exchange of experiences and good practices across sectors.

- **Universal presence and global-to-local reach**
  Owing to this extensive field infrastructure, UNDP can facilitate the exchange of experiences across countries and is uniquely positioned to facilitate South-South dialogue and cooperation on complex issues, including the promotion of open and inclusive governance arrangements. Furthermore, combining its global role and country presence (including at the sub-national level), UNDP can support countries in engaging more effectively in global processes and contribute to ensuring that these processes reflect perspectives from the Global South.

- **Convening power**
  UNDP is well positioned to make a strong impact on the promotion of an open and inclusive public sphere due to its unique ability to tap, at the same time, into long-standing relationships of trust with public authorities and into extensive partnership with civil society and media actors, as well as a range of human rights defenders. Through this convening capacity, UNDP can play an important role in building trust among actors, facilitating dialogue for policy reform and supporting the co-creation of solutions for inclusive and participatory governance.
Programmatic options to promote an open and inclusive public sphere

The UNDP document, ‘Promoting an open and inclusive public sphere: Programmatic options’, complements the content of this note by offering guidance on specific interventions that could be undertaken by UNDP Country Offices around the world to promote an open and inclusive public sphere. The document identifies four priority areas of focus: ‘Nurturing spaces for civic engagement’, ‘Enabling access to quality information’, ‘Culture and education for constructive engagement’, and ‘Promoting equal participation in the public sphere’. For each of these priority areas, potential programmatic entry points and related actions are described, together with examples of relevant initiatives undertaken by different parts of UNDP.