Promoting an open and inclusive public sphere
Programmatic options
Acknowledgements

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The public sphere – the complex set of spaces in which people come together to articulate visions of the public good – is a key dimension of governance. It gives people the opportunity to engage in dialogue with each other over what should be regarded as advancing the “common interest” (thus fostering a sense of shared destiny). But it also enables members of a community to bring their perspective to bear on the actions of the public authority (thus connecting citizens and the state). It is in the public sphere that the social contract is discussed, negotiated and continuously reassessed. Hence, improving the quality of the social contract will require improving the quality of the public sphere.

A public sphere can be considered open and inclusive when it allows for the meaningful participation of all citizens1 without discrimination. In practice, this involves a number of conditions. In an open and inclusive public sphere, people are empowered to freely express their opinion and engage in collective action. They also have access to the information they need to take part in public debate and are able to provide inputs in public decision-making through a variety of channels. In addition, in order for the public sphere to be genuinely open and inclusive, dedicated systems need to be in place to remove barriers preventing the full involvement of specific population groups in public life.

1 Here and elsewhere in the document, the term ‘citizen’ is not used in the legal sense of an individual 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.

A theoretical framework for work on an open and inclusive public sphere

The UNDP paper ‘What is an open and inclusive public sphere? A framing note’ complements the content of this document by offering a detailed theoretical framework for work on an open and inclusive public sphere. In particular, the paper clarifies the concept of public sphere, building on some of the most relevant scholarship, provides an operational definition of openness and inclusiveness as they relate to the public sphere, articulates the normative and instrumental case for an open and inclusive public sphere, and outlines the main elements of UNDP’s added value in this field.
Promoting an open and inclusive public sphere

Programmatic options • Introduction

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.\(^2\) 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.\(^3\) 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.\(^4\)

In its 2022-2025 Strategic Plan, UNDP has committed to promoting an open and inclusive public sphere as part of its efforts to ensure that no one is left behind and that public action is guided by a rights-based approach, centred on human agency and human development. There are a number of key assets that the organization will be able to leverage in the pursuit of this goal. These include established capacity and a proven track record in relevant programmatic areas; the ability to serve as a trusted convener of multi-stakeholder dialogue, due to longstanding relations with public authorities and strong partnerships with non-governmental actors; an extensive field presence at national and subnational levels; and the ability to engage with a broad range of institutions across spheres of governance and thematic sectors.

Objectives of this note

The present document seeks to support work envisaged under Output 2.4 of UNDP’s Strategic Plan (‘Democratic institutions and processes strengthened for an inclusive and open public sphere with expanded public engagement’) as well as Outcome 2 of the Global Programme to Promote Accountable, Inclusive and Effective Governance, ‘Governance for People and Planet’ (‘People are empowered as positive agents of change in an open and inclusive public sphere’).

Building on the theoretical foundations laid out in the companion paper, ‘What is an open and inclusive public sphere? A framing note’, this document identifies a number of priority areas in which UNDP Country Offices may engage to promote an open and inclusive public sphere. For each priority area, potential programmatic entry points are described, together with examples of initiatives already undertaken by UNDP around the world.

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4 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.
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.

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.

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.

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.

5 For a more in-depth review of these conditions, see UNDP (2024). What is an open and inclusive public sphere? A framing note.
Promoting an open and inclusive public sphere
Programmatic options • An integrated approach

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

Figure 1. Promoting an open and inclusive public sphere

- Promoting regulatory frameworks based on the full recognition of the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly, together with adequate venues for participation and dialogue as well as a vibrant civil society.

- Removing legal, cultural and practical barriers that prevent the participation in public life of discriminated population groups, while also addressing capacity differentials resulting from histories of marginalization.

- Promoting effective public communication and transparency on the part of state institutions as well as a free, independent and pluralistic media, together with adequate mechanisms to respond to information pollution and fragmentation.

- Promoting a culture that values citizens’ active engagement while strengthening citizens’ capacity to constructively engage in public life, including through civic education and media and information literacy.
Advancing social cohesion and reducing political polarization

The process of dialogue, which constitutes the foundational element of the public sphere, is only possible to the extent that citizens retain some sense of shared destiny and are able to identify some form of common ground. Addressing these issues therefore represents a key aspect of efforts to promote an open and inclusive public sphere.

Addressing inequalities and power relations

Social and economic inequalities not only undermine social cohesion, but also create major disparities in people’s access to the material and non-material resources that are needed to effectively engage in public debate. Accordingly, the promotion of a meaningful public sphere requires proactive efforts to address a society’s imbalance in power relations.

Strengthening the legitimacy of state institutions

Citizen-state dialogue requires state institutions that are not only legitimate but also perceived as such. For this reason, work on strengthening the integrity of public action and the effectiveness of political representation – including work to strengthen the capacity of electoral and parliamentary institutions – is key to maintaining a meaningful public sphere.

Strengthening the administrative capacity of the state

Discussions in the public sphere regarding the appropriate exercise of public authority can only be meaningful if they are of some consequence. Strengthening the capacity of the state to effectively respond to complex development challenges is therefore key to preventing citizen disillusionment and disengagement.

Figure 2: Additional factors impacting the quality of the public sphere

Naturally, the factors mentioned above are far from the only ones with an impact on the quality of the public sphere. It is important to stress, therefore, that the work highlighted in the following sections is meant to complement efforts in other areas (within and beyond governance), which are highly relevant to the objectives outlined in this note, even if outside the scope of the present document.

These efforts include, but are not limited to, the following themes:

**Advancing social cohesion and reducing political polarization**

**Addressing inequalities and power relations**

**Strengthening the legitimacy of state institutions**

**Strengthening the administrative capacity of the state**

Programmatic options • An integrated approach

- Out of scope of the note
  - Complex patterns of reciprocal influence

- Within scope of the note
  - Spaces for civic engagement
  - Access to quality information
  - Culture and education
  - Equality in participation
  - Broader factors
    - Social cohesion and polarization
    - Inequality and power relations
  - State-centred factors
    - State legitimacy
    - State capacity

Figure 2. Additional factors impacting the quality of the public sphere
Over the last decade (and perhaps even longer) a significant deterioration has been observed with respect to the overall conditions for active and informed citizenship around the world.

As noted in the UN Secretary-General’s Call to Action for Human Rights, “[i]n too many places, an open space for [...] participation is shrinking.” Virtually all of the indicators measuring civil society organizations’ ability to operate in the Varieties of Democracy dataset\(^6\) have worsened since 2010: for instance, the CSO entry and exit indicator dropped from 1.09 to 0.83;\(^7\) while the CSO repression indicator decreased from 1.05 to 0.71.\(^8\) According to the CIVICUS Monitor, as of 2023, over two thirds of the world population (70.1 percent) live in a country that is characterized by a repressed or closed civic space (the highest percentage since the Monitor was launched).

The shrinking of the operating space for civil society actors has been driven to a large extent by the passing of legislation narrowing the scope for the exercise of civil liberties (especially the freedoms of expression and association). Concerns over terrorism or foreign interference have often been cited among the reasons for the introduction of such legislation but, as documented inter alia by the International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law,\(^9\) the COVID-19 pandemic produced a significant acceleration of this trend, as restrictions introduced under states of emergency have become de facto permanent. At the same time, restrictive regulatory provisions have been compounded by various forms of intimidation and harassment by both state and non-state actors. In fact, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders has documented highly concerning trends in relation to long-term detention as well as death threats and killings of activists and other grave human rights violations and abuses of human rights defenders.\(^10\) As countries are faced with complex challenges and experience deep social tensions, an increase in protests has been observed globally.\(^11\) However, these protests have often been met with repressive

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6  https://www.v-dem.net/data.html
7  CSO entry and exit (C) (v2cseeorgs): To what extent does the government achieve control over entry and exit by civil society organizations (CSOs) into public life? Responses on a 0-4 scale, with lower values corresponding to higher control.
8  CSO repression (C) (v2csrepress): Does the government attempt to repress civil society organizations (CSOs)? Responses on a 0-4 scale, with lower values corresponding to higher repression.
9  https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/
11 Samuel Brannen, Christian Stirling Haig and Katherine Schmidt in The Age of Mass Protests: Understanding an Escalating Global Trend (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020) estimate that mass protests have increased by an average of 11.5 percent annually throughout the world from 2009 to 2019.
responses, including indiscriminate use of surveillance, excessive use of force and mass incarceration.\textsuperscript{12}

Trends in access to information, freedom of expression and the safety of media personnel are equally concerning. In a 2022 report, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) observed that, despite the adoption of right-to-information laws by many countries, implementation continued to lag, often due to vaguely formulated national security reasons.\textsuperscript{13} The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reports that, over the past five years, approximately 85 percent of the world’s population experienced a decline in press freedom in their respective countries.\textsuperscript{14} The reasons for this trend are multiple and complex. As in the case of civic space, several regulatory provisions have been adopted that undermine media freedom and independence (for instance, through overly broad definitions of ‘defamation’). Furthermore, the already precarious economic viability of media outlets has significantly worsened as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, compounded by the continued shift of audiences and revenue away from news outlets and towards Internet companies. Meanwhile, the onslaught of disinformation and other potentially harmful content has substantially undermined public trust in the media. In this context, media personnel – especially women journalists – remain highly vulnerable to harassment and violence. Between 2012 and 2023, UNESCO documented the killings of 1,170 media personnel. Fewer than 12 percent of these cases were judicially resolved — meaning that there was no criminal accountability for nearly nine out ten killings of media personnel worldwide.

The above trends have been accompanied, and to a considerable extent enabled, by a worsening of attitudes towards democracy around the world. In a 2019 survey of 34 countries, for instance, the Pew Research Center found that a median of 52 percent of respondents were dissatisfied with the way democracy is functioning in their country, compared with 44 percent who reported being satisfied. In the same survey, only 32 percent of respondents expressed agreement with the statement, “elected officials care about what people like me think.”\textsuperscript{15} A similar survey conducted in 2023, although in a slightly smaller sample of 24 countries, found that a median of 59 percent of respondents are dissatisfied with how their democracy is functioning, while a median of 74 percent believe that elected officials do not care about what people like them think.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{12} See, e.g., International Network of Civil Liberties Organizations (2013). \textit{Take Back the Streets: Repression and Criminalization of Protest around the World.}


\textsuperscript{15} Pew Research Center (2020). \textit{Democratic Rights Popular Globally but Commitment to Them Not Always Strong. Most say elected officials are out of touch.}

\textsuperscript{16} Pew Research Center (2024). \textit{Representative Democracy Remains a Popular Ideal, but People Around the World Are Critical of How It’s Working.}
Digitalization and the public sphere

A key element in the evolution of the public sphere is the dramatic impact that different digitalization processes (including advances in low-cost computing and mobile connectivity, the Internet and progress in research on artificial intelligence) have had on all aspects of society, including governance.

In unpacking the complex issues involved, at least three aspects should be taken into account.

The emergence of a digital public sphere

Digital transformation has resulted in the emergence of a new, online dimension of the public sphere. This new dimension comes with distinct opportunities (for instance, much greater access to information and a ‘democratization’ of the public debate) but also distinct challenges (such as the increased potential for information pollution or the complexities related to the regulatory role played by private companies that own social media platforms).

The impact of digital transformation on civic organizing and state-citizen interactions

Digital tools offer new opportunities for civic organizing (for instance, in the case of crowdfunding or in the coordination of protest movements) as well as state-citizen interaction (for instance, via open data ecosystems or digital platforms for citizen consultation). But digitalization has also brought about new challenges (such as the potential of digitally-powered surveillance as a form of repression, or the complex ethical issues raised by the utilization of artificial intelligence in the context of governance).

Digital transformation as a topic of public debate

In view of their profound impact on society, it is critical for processes of digital transformation to be the object of adequate public scrutiny. However, this is likely to require – at least to some extent – new regulatory frameworks and governance mechanisms. Transparency on the part of companies involved in technological development and digital literacy will also be critical in order for public debate on these issues to be meaningful and genuinely inclusive.

Notwithstanding the challenges outlined above, there remain significant opportunities to advance work on promoting an open and inclusive public sphere.
Despite dissatisfaction with the actual functioning of democratic systems, the values of democratic governance remain overwhelmingly popular around the world. For instance, 86.9 percent of people interviewed during the seventh wave of the World Values Survey (carried out in 92 countries between 2017 and 2020) stated that it is important for them to live in a country that is governed democratically, with 73.9 percent attributing a very high level of importance to democracy. In the same survey, 73 percent of respondents expressed the opinion that the protection of civil rights is a defining characteristic of democracy, with 57.3 percent considering civil rights as absolutely essential.

Many of the commitments in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was adopted by all UN member states in 2015, specifically refer to key features of an open and inclusive public sphere. These include (but are not limited to) targets 16.7 (responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making), 16.10 (access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms), 10.3 (social, economic and political inclusion of all) and 4.7 (education for global citizenship). The Voluntary National Reviews mechanism that is being implemented as part of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development can help create political space for national-level dialogue on these targets.

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17 Based on answers to the question: How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically? On this scale where 1 means it is ‘not at all important’ and 10 means ‘absolutely important’ what position would you choose? 73.9 percent of respondents selected a value between 8 and 10 and 86.9 percent selected a value between 6 and 10.

18 Based on answers to the question: Please tell me for each of the following things how essential you think it is as a characteristic of democracy. Use this scale where 1 means ‘not at all an essential characteristic of democracy’ and 10 means it definitely is ‘an essential characteristic of democracy: Civil rights protect people’s liberty from state oppression.’ 57.3 percent of respondents selected a value between 8 and 10 and 73 percent selected a value between 6 and 10.
But Voluntary National Reviews are not the only global mechanism that can be leveraged to achieve local impact. The Universal Periodic Review conducted by the UN Human Rights Council has had an appreciable effect not only in moving the human rights agenda forward in individual countries, but also in catalyzing the formation of coalitions among civil society actors as well as collaboration between public authorities and non-state actors. Other opportunities for dialogue and reform at the country level can be found in the framework of global multi-stakeholder partnerships. The Open Government Partnership, for instance, brings together 77 countries, 106 local governments and a range of other actors to develop and implement a broad range of open government initiatives.

A wide variety of methodological innovations are being pursued, which have the potential to make the public sphere more open and inclusive for people around the world. Some of these revolve around the design of public dialogue processes, as in the case of what has been referred to as the “deliberative wave.” Others focus on how data on matters of public concern can be made more accessible (as in the case of initiatives like the Data-Pop Alliance) or how citizens themselves can generate data to inform public debate (as in the case of CIVICUS’s DataShift initiative). Other innovations are directed towards leveraging digital tools to facilitate interactions between state authorities and the public (as for instance documented in the various World e-Parliament Reports produced by the International Parliamentary Union).

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20 https://www.opengovpartnership.org/process/joining-ogp/open-government-declaration/
Part 2. Priority areas for programming

2.1 A menu of options

This section outlines a number of programmatic entry points related to the priority areas of work identified in Section 1.1. Under each entry point, an overview is provided of possible interventions with a focus on country-level action (see Figure 3). Key resources and examples of UNDP initiatives are provided as well, with a strong emphasis on instances in which principles of social and technological innovation were deployed to achieve relevant goals. It is envisaged that the programmatic directions highlighted in the document will be pursued in keeping with the principles of delivery and areas of elevated effort outlined in the Global Programme, ‘Governance for People and Planet’ 22, through an appropriate mix of activities that reflect UNDP’s specific strengths. These include:

- Research and analysis
- Prototyping and experimentation
- Policy advice
- Programme support
- Capacity development
- Dialogue facilitation
- Coalition building

Figure 3. Priority areas of work and programmatic entry points

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22 According to G4PP’s principles of delivery, UNDP’s work in the area of governance will be people-centred, human rights-based, politically-informed, context-specific, using a systems approach, informed by principles of adaptability and innovation, and focused on scale and impact. The areas of elevated efforts are gender equality, localization, digitalization, and data innovation and analytics.
When considering the proposed programmatic directions outlined below, two additional points should be taken into account.

**Partnership orientation**

In keeping with the strong partnership orientation highlighted in UNDP’s Strategic Plan, the work described in the rest of this section is designed to be carried out primarily through alliances and collaborative arrangements. Some partners will be relevant across all priority areas. That will be the case, for instance, for parliaments, relevant sectors of public administration (including the administration of justice), independent public bodies (with a special focus on national human rights institutions), centres of government, and local authorities. Also, for all themes, partnership will be needed with academia, the private sector and a variety of civic organizations — not only highly-structured non-governmental organizations, but also more informal ones, as well as diffuse movements and grassroots initiatives. Furthermore, a proactive effort will be needed to maximize coordination and synergy with relevant parts of the UN system, such as OHCHR, UN Women and UNESCO, as well as multi-stakeholder platforms, such as the Open Government Partnership, the SDG 16 Global Alliance and many more. An additional set of partnerships will be more specific to certain themes, as illustrated below.

**Table 1. Examples of theme-specific partnerships**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMATIC AREAS</th>
<th>EXAMPLES OF RELEVANT THEME-SPECIFIC PARTNERSHIPS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civic space</td>
<td>National institutions with regulatory authority over the civil society sector, national umbrella organizations of non-governmental organizations, international civil society organizations with a focus on civic space issues such as the International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law and CIVICUS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information integrity</td>
<td>National institutions overseeing implementation of freedom of information regulatory frameworks, national institutions with regulatory authority over the media sector, media outlets, journalists’ professional bodies, fact-checking initiatives, Internet companies, UNESCO Information and Communication Sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and culture</td>
<td>Various institutions within the education sector, individuals or networks of opinion influencers, specific civil society organizations working on promoting civic education or information literacy, potential partners in the media and art sectors, UNESCO Education Sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-discrimination</td>
<td>National institutions with a mandate related to specific population groups experiencing discrimination, representative organizations of groups experiencing discrimination or marginalization, including young people, women, indigenous people, persons with disabilities, LGBT+ people and migrants, among others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From programmatic entry points to actual programming

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. In other words, the transition from programmatic entry points to actual programming may be seen as the result of an intersection between the possible approaches scoped out in this document, Country Office capacities and national-level priorities and opportunities. Also, while the proposed entry points are structured vertically by priority area 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 (see figure 4).

23 This could be achieved for instance through the ‘Three-Step Analysis’ approach, which helps analyze immediate, underlying and root causes of development issues as well as the roles and capacity gaps of the actors involved. See, e.g., UNDP (2012). Mainstreaming Human Rights in Development Policies and Programming: UNDP Experiences.

24 For instance, while it is not possible to address the issue in detail in the context of this note, it is important to mention here the importance for programming to take into account the unique challenges and opportunities that characterize fragile and conflict-affected settings.
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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CIV SPA</th>
<th>ACC INF</th>
<th>EDU CUL</th>
<th>EQU PAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NGO regulation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Political leadership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media regulation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.
Figure 4. Moving beyond silos in programming (cont.)

Example 3. Protecting information integrity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CIV SPA</th>
<th>ACC INF</th>
<th>EDU CUL</th>
<th>EQU PAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civil society monitoring</td>
<td>Dialogue on disinfo</td>
<td>Info literacy campaigns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CIV SPA</th>
<th>ACC INF</th>
<th>EDU CUL</th>
<th>EQU PAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue opportunities Strengthen organizations</td>
<td>Rights-based reporting</td>
<td></td>
<td>Remove legal discrimination</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.
Nurturing spaces for civic engagement

Overview of entry points

UNDP can nurture spaces for civic engagement in multiple ways. A key dimension of this work is promoting regulatory frameworks that guarantee the exercise of the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly in line with human rights standards. UNDP can complement such efforts by assisting public institutions to create an appropriate citizen participation infrastructure that enables public input to policymaking, as well social accountability. The facilitation of inclusive, multi-stakeholder dialogue processes is another way in which UNDP can open avenues for civic engagement. And the development of mechanisms to support civil society organizations will often be foundational to all other activities in this area.

### Key areas of work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regulatory frameworks for civic space</th>
<th>Facilitation of dialogue processes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citizen participation infrastructure</td>
<td>Civil society support infrastructure</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Photo: UNDP Eurasia
Promoting an open and inclusive public sphere
Programmatic options • Priority area 1

Priority area 1 – Key definitions

While recognizing that civil society is a complex and contested notion and that different definitional approaches may be needed in different contexts, this note will adopt the following definitions:

Civil society
The arena outside the spheres of the family, the state and the market in which individual and collective actors undertake free and voluntary action in order to advance socially-relevant goals – i.e., goals related to the conditions of a collectivity, be it a group within society or society at large.

The definitions of ‘civil society organizations’ and ‘civic engagement’ follow from the above.

Civil society organizations
The broad range of formal and informal organized collective actors operating in the civil society arena.

Civic engagement
The broad range of actions undertaken by individual and collective actors operating in the civil society arena.

If civil society is an abstract domain of social interaction (essentially a theoretical construct), civic space represents the actual circumstances in which civic engagement happens (or does not happen) in a given society, at a given point in time. The features of the civic space will determine in very practical ways the size, shape and functioning of the civil society arena for a certain society, including the extent to which a certain operating environment can be regarded as ‘enabling’ for a range of civil society actors. We therefore adopt the following definition:

Civic space
The environmental factors determining the extent to which members of society are able – either individually or collectively – to engage in civic action or, in other words, the conditions that make a meaningful and vibrant civil society possible (or not) in a given context.

25 For instance, a more operational definition of ‘civil society organization’ may be needed in order to determine eligibility for funding or accreditation to events.

26 Social movements, volunteer groups, organizations representing the interests of specific social groups, faith-based organizations, labour unions, business associations, membership-based organizations, foundations, registered charities and community-based organizations are all examples of the diversity encompassed by the term, ‘civil society.’

27 Civic engagement can take a multiplicity of forms and objectives, including influencing the outcome of policy-making processes, holding state institutions accountable for the fulfillment of their responsibilities, shaping cultural norms and practices, and complementing (or supplementing) the state and market delivery of goods and services.
Possible workstreams

Regulatory frameworks for civic space

Activities under this workstream focus on promoting regulatory frameworks that are conducive to the exercise of civil liberties. They may address provisions directly impacting the freedom of expression, such as the scope of defamation laws, or legislation regulating the freedom of association (often in the form of ‘NGO laws’). But they could also include support to public authorities in the development of human rights-based models of assembly management, particularly in the context of protest movements. The strengthening of mechanisms to protect human rights defenders, including strategies to ensure access to justice, will often be another priority area. Under this workstream, specific emphasis should be devoted to the unique regulatory challenges related to online civic spaces.

Resource | UNDP-ICNL publication on legal frameworks for civic space

The publication, Legal Frameworks for Civic Space: A Practical Toolkit, produced by UNDP in collaboration with the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, provides an overview of human rights standards applicable to civic space, with a focus on the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association, as well as guidance on how to ensure that national legislative frameworks are aligned with these standards.

Access it here

Africa | NHRIs, civic space and human rights defenders

UNDP, in partnership with OHCHR and the Global Alliance for National Human Rights Institutions, has been at the forefront of efforts to support National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) in implementing the Marrakech Declaration, which outlines the role of NHRIs in expanding civic space and promoting and protecting human rights defenders, with a specific focus on women. In this context, UNDP has been working with the Network of African National Human Rights Institutions to develop a number of tools in support of the Declaration. These include: a Regional Action Plan; National Action Plan Template, and Monitoring Framework on the Implementation of the Marrakech Declaration; a Model Law on the Recognition, Protection, and Promotion of the Rights of Human Rights Defenders in Africa; and a Quick Response Reference Handbook for NHRIs when Handling Matters Related to Human Rights Defenders.

More info here
Citizen participation infrastructure

This workstream is centred on supporting public authorities in the design of institutional mechanisms to facilitate meaningful citizen participation in the development and implementation of public policy. Activities in this area may include broad interventions, such as the development of an infrastructure to secure citizen input to law-making, or they may address more specific policy functions, as in the case, for instance, of participatory budgeting or participatory technology assessments. These activities may have a national scope or engage sub-national authorities. In some cases, they will include the roll-out of social accountability schemes enabling citizens to provide feedback on the performance of the public administration and to participate in the ongoing recalibration of policy implementation modalities.

Resource | Global Parliamentary Report on public engagement in the work of parliament

The 2022 Global Parliamentary Report, *Public engagement in the work of parliament*, jointly produced by UNDP and the International Parliamentary Union, sets out a roadmap for enhanced public engagement by parliaments and parliamentarians, together with practical guidance on working collaboratively with communities in order to achieve participatory, inclusive and responsive parliaments.

Access it [here](#).

Various | Participation mechanisms at the sub-national level

UNDP has been working with local authorities to set up participation mechanisms at the sub-national level in several countries. For instance, in Algeria it supported the establishment of Municipal Advisory Councils and the development of Citizen Participation Charters, while in Bangladesh it is strengthening the capacity of local government institutions to implement various public engagement initiatives, including open budgets, participatory planning and social audits.

More info on Algeria [here](#) and [here](#) and on Bangladesh [here](#).

Innovation focus | Social Innovation Platforms

Social Innovation Platforms use a systems approach to break down sectoral silos across, and facilitate the co-design of, portfolios of interconnected solutions in order to address complex challenges. Through mapping, deep listening and community sense-making, Social Innovation Platforms reveals hidden opportunities and challenges, while generating new spaces for inclusive participation and community collaboration. Some of the issues addressed by the Platforms include sustainable tourism in Indonesia, urban resilience in Pakistan, and local food systems in Thailand.

More info on [here](#).
Dialogue processes

UNDP often receives requests to support the convening of public dialogue processes. These may include dialogue between different segments of society as well as dialogue between members of the public and state institutions. In some cases, dialogue processes supported by UNDP may be carried out in the context of large-scale national envisioning exercises. On other occasions, they may focus on the local level, or be linked to a specific issue or sector. The composition of participating members of the public will vary, but typically such processes tend to have a multi-stakeholder nature. UNDP can contribute to the openness and inclusiveness of dialogue processes by assisting with substantive framing, process design and outreach efforts. UNDP can also provide ongoing support to multi-stakeholder alliances emerging from these processes.

Resource | UNDP-DESA
Framework to analyze the quality of stakeholder engagement

UNDP, together with the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, has developed the publication, What is a good practice? A framework to analyze the quality of stakeholder engagement in implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda. The publication provides public authorities and other stakeholders with the tools to examine and strengthen the quality of specific stakeholder engagement practices in relation to the key principles of inclusion, participation and accountability.

Access it here

Innovation focus | Towards more meaningful dialogue: stronger data foundations

In several countries, UNDP has been engaging in data innovation as a way to provide a stronger evidence base to dialogue processes. Among other things, this included experimentation with new methodologies to elicit citizen perspectives, including deep listening, opinion mining in big data environments, opinion polling, micronarratives and ethnographic research. UNDP’s Accelerator Lab in Tanzania, for instance, has been reaching out to local communities through Data Zetu (“Data Share Back”) sessions.
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based on previously collected satellite imagery and crowd mapping data, while the Accelerator Lab in Colombia has been using AI-powered social listening in the digital sphere as a starting point to engage youth on national peace and development issues.

More info on Tanzania here and on Colombia here

Innovation focus | Towards more meaningful dialogue: better process design

Another way in which UNDP has been trying to promote more meaningful dialogue is innovation in process design. Relevant experiences in this context include the adoption of deliberative democracy methodologies as well as the use of techniques such as gamification and scenario analysis (sometimes supported by simulation models). In Peru, for example, a game-based process was developed to facilitate a dialogue on the country’s post-COVID future and build collaboration networks. In Malaysia, work was carried out to popularize the foresight approach beyond professional policy circles through engagement with students in various educational settings.

More info on Peru here and on Malaysia here
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Civil society support infrastructure

The primary focus of this workstream is the development of an infrastructure of support for civil society actors that is effective, equitable and free from political interference. In some cases, this work may take the form of capacity development for national authorities overseeing civil society matters. In other cases, it may engage authorities with specific sectoral or thematic mandates. At times, it may involve the provision of direct support to civil society actors on the part of UNDP. The content of this support can vary. It may seek to enhance operational skills or substantive knowledge, but it may also involve assistance in partnership-building and the creation of networks and spaces for autonomous civil society interaction. A topic that should be given special consideration is enhancing the financial viability of civil society, either through public funding (as in the case, for instance, of social innovation funds) or private investment (as in the case of social stock exchanges, crowdfunding and other forms of innovative financing). Work in this area may also focus on providing support to organizations that are not typically seen as expressions of civil society but which nonetheless play a key role in enabling collective action, such as political parties and trade unions.

Ukraine | Civil society for democracy and human rights

Operating within the framework of the National Strategy for the Facilitation of Civil Society Development, the project Civil Society for Enhanced Democracy and Human Rights has been working to help Ukrainian civil society organizations have a stronger impact on national reform processes, with a focus on promoting a more inclusive, democratic and rights-based governance. A network of eight civil society regional hubs was established with assistance from the project and over 40 organizations were supported in the implementation of projects on democracy, human rights and youth civic engagement.

More info here and here

Kenya | Amkeni Wakenya

Amkeni Wakenya is a UNDP-managed facility which seeks to enable citizens to participate effectively in democratic governance by providing support to civil society organizations. Since its inception, Amkeni Wakenya has provided support to over 400 organizations operating in a range of thematic areas across Kenya in the form of grants, capacity building, and learning and knowledge management.

More info here

Western Balkans | Regional Programme on Local Democracy

UNDP’s Regional Programme on Local Democracy in the Western Balkans (ReLOaD) works with local authorities to provide an enabling environment for civil society organizations. Among other things, the project supported partner local governments in institutionalizing a transparent model of civil society funding aimed at promoting greater civic participation in decision-making processes as well as improved service delivery in local communities (the LOD methodology).

More info here
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Various | Tadamon Crowdfunding Academy

The Tadamon Crowdfunding Academy, a joint initiative of UNDP and the Islamic Development Bank, is an interactive training programme that provides civil society organizations with the knowledge and skills they need to run successful crowdfunding campaigns. To date, the Tadamon Crowdfunding Academy capacity-building sessions were completed in Burkina Faso, Comoros, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Morocco, Niger, Pakistan, Palestine, Senegal, Somalia and Tunisia, reaching a total of 345 civil society organizations.

More info here

Innovation focus | Digital platforms for civic engagement

Different parts of UNDP have been experimenting with the creation of digital platforms both as a tool to improve the state-citizen interface and as a mechanism to support public debate, activism and civic organizing. For instance, the Agora platform, established by the government of Panama with UNDP’s support, facilitated inputs from more than 50,000 citizens and residents towards the formulation of a new development vision for the country. The RedPublica platform in Peru, on the other hand, represents an independent space that is connecting thousands of young people across the country in the development of shared proposals for policy reform.

More info on Panama here and on Peru here
Enabling access to quality information

Overview of entry points

UNDP can enable access to quality information through a range of interventions. Some of these interventions will focus on facilitating the generation of reliable informational content. This is, for instance, the case of activities promoting the adoption of effective and ethical communication practices on the part of public institutions, including appropriate transparency standards. Another key aspect of supporting the generation of high-quality informational content is the promotion of a free, independent and pluralistic media sector. A complementary set of efforts may seek to address various information system dynamics that prevent people from accessing quality information. Responding to information pollution and information fragmentation would be natural priorities in this respect.

Key areas of work

- Public communication and transparency
- Addressing information pollution
- Media development
- Addressing information fragmentation

Photo: UNDP Somalia
**Priority area 2 – Key definitions**

People’s ability to access information can be understood as a function of the specific information ecosystem in which they are situated, where “information ecosystem” is defined as follows:

**Information ecosystem**
A complex adaptive system that includes information infrastructures, tools, media, producers, consumers, curators, and sharers. Information ecosystems are complex organizations of dynamic social relationships through which information moves and transforms in flows.

We can think about the quality of information ecosystems in terms of information integrity and information pollution, using the following definitions:

**Information integrity**
The ability of an information ecosystem to produce – through a range of systems and processes – accurate, consistent and reliable content, thus allowing members of society to access trustworthy, balanced and complete information on matters of public concern.

**Information pollution**
Verifiably false, misleading, or manipulated content on- and offline, which is created, produced and disseminated intentionally or unintentionally, and which has the potential to cause harm. As such, information pollution encompasses the concepts of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation.\(^{28}\)

In a pluralistic society, there will always be alternative and potentially conflicting interpretations of public affairs. However, in order for public debate to be meaningful, it must be based on an understanding of reality that is shared to at least some extent. This shared understanding of reality may be undermined by information fragmentation, which we define as follows:

**Information fragmentation**
A process through which the members of a community tend to cluster into parallel information ecosystems that produce incompatible accounts of reality. This phenomenon is closely intertwined with social, economic and political polarization and combines in complex ways with information pollution.\(^{29}\)

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28 Disinformation is information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country. Misinformation is information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm. Malinformation is information that is based on real facts, but manipulated to inflict harm on a person, social group, organization or country.

29 This concept is closely linked to the notion of the ‘echo chamber’, which is an environment where people only encounter information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own beliefs or opinions.
Possible workstreams

Public communication and transparency

This workstream seeks to strengthen public authorities’ capacity to communicate effectively with the public. It may address issues related to content creation, such as the development of more evidence-based and audience-aware messaging (including through the application of insights from cognitive science). But it may also cover issues of process management, such as the strengthening of coordination protocols within public authorities as well as the development of partnerships for public communication with media and civil society actors. Another important aspect of the workstream is support for the development of normative frameworks and operational systems aimed at facilitating access to information related to the exercise of public authority. The unique opportunities offered by digitalization, in terms of both public communication and transparency, also represent a key focus of this area of work.

Innovation focus | Augmented reality for public communication

In an effort to identify new, compelling ways to communicate about complex development issues, the UNDP Accelerator Lab in Colombia designed the application, Augmented Development (Desarrollo Augmentado). Through this application, photographs describing development stories in Colombia come to life via augmented reality, allowing people to discover the perspectives of other communities, including those based in remote rural areas.

More info here

Mexico | Promoting transparency at the municipal level

As part of the project, Support to transparency, integrity and citizen participation for sustainable development, UNDP’s Country Office in Mexico developed a self-assessment toolkit to assist municipalities in evaluating their implementation of the principles of open government, and to identify practical steps for improvement. Measures to ensure access to information, both proactive and reactive, are a key component of the toolkit.

More info here

Serbia | Promoting a national open data ecosystem

In Serbia, under the initiative, Open Data – Open Opportunities, UNDP has been supporting the development of a comprehensive open data ecosystem. A National Open Data Portal was established, among other things, as part of this programme, together with an Open Data Hub to inform, educate and connect different actors interested in promoting transparency for improved governance.

Access the Portal here and the Hub here
Media development

The key goal of this workstream is to maximize media actors’ potential to contribute to constructive public debate. A significant part of efforts in this area revolve around promoting regulatory frameworks that are conducive to a free, independent and pluralistic media. Such efforts may address the general norms regulating freedom of expression and access to information, but also more specific provisions, such as those regulating media markets and ownership, as well as those affecting the confidentiality of sources and the safety of journalists, to mention just a few examples. Additional efforts may involve strengthening media capacity (in terms of both ensuring operational viability and the fulfillment of professional standards) as well as enhancing the media’s ability to provide constructive coverage of specific development issues, or serve as conveners of dialogue in fragmented, highly-polarized societies. Support to public broadcasting may also be part of this workstream.

Sierra Leone | Support to comprehensive media sector reform

As part of a comprehensive media development programme, UNDP’s Country Office in Sierra Leone supported policy dialogue around the reform of the Criminal Libel Law, the Independent Media Commission Act, and the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation Act. In addition, the project was instrumental in the review of the Code of Ethics of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists and the establishment of the Media Reform Coordinating Group as a multi-stakeholder initiative to drive media development nationally.

More info here and here

Cambodia | Media Alternatives project

As part of the Media Alternatives project, UNDP Cambodia commissioned a media market audit to assess challenges and opportunities for media entrepreneurs and start-ups in Cambodia. To follow up on this, a Media Lab was organized for media professionals and potential entrepreneurs, followed by a Media Alternatives Business Challenge that identified five initiatives to be supported through an incubation and acceleration journey.

More info here

Resource | Case studies on UNDP’s engagement with the media

The report, ‘UNDP’s Engagement with the Media for Governance, Sustainable Development and Peace’, features 13 country case studies highlighting the diverse scope, successes and lessons learned from UNDP’s engagement with the media. Among other things, the report illustrates how UNDP has been supporting media in promoting accountable governance, contributing to conflict prevention, and fighting discrimination.

Access it here

Innovation focus | Citizens as content creators

UNDP has been supporting several initiatives to empower individuals as creators of informational content. In Somalia, the Accelerator Lab implemented a programme designed to equip young women and men with the digital storytelling skills they needed to generate, edit and share powerful stories about development priorities and initiatives in their communities. In Asia, UNDP partnered with YouTube under the Creators for Change initiative to support content creators in developing Impact Projects—films that tackle topics ranging from self-acceptance and showing kindness to others, to celebrating cultures and advocating for global empathy.

More info on Somalia here and on Creators for Change here
Addressing information pollution

This workstream encompasses a broad set of interventions aimed at addressing information pollution. A key starting point of work in this area will often be the development of monitoring systems to detect specific instances of information pollution and to shed light on recurrent patterns of information pollution propagation. Other critical interventions may include activities to strengthen the effectiveness and sustainability of fact-checking initiatives, as well as the capacity of journalists to spot, investigate and report on information pollution. Strategic communication to raise awareness of information pollution among the general public and to promote responsible content use and sharing may also be part of the combination of interventions under this workstream. In many contexts, UNDP is well positioned to advance policy dialogue and, where appropriate, coalition building with key actors, such as political parties, opinion leaders, public authorities, media outlets, and Internet companies to identify shared solutions to information pollution challenges. In addition, UNDP may support the strengthening of national capacity for swift and effective responses in the face of high-impact instances of mis-, dis- and malinformation. Sometimes these interventions can be implemented as stand-alone initiatives, but often they will be embedded within broader programmes, particularly in the case of programmes dealing with information pollution ‘flashpoint events’, such as conflict and other crises, as well as high-profile political processes, such as elections or the consideration of especially polarizing legislation.

Resource | Strategic guidance note on information integrity

The guidance note, ‘Information Integrity: Forging a Pathway to Truth, Resilience and Trust,’ was developed to support UNDP’s country, regional and thematic teams, as well as their partners, to implement effective responses to information pollution. After clarifying key definitions and conceptual issues, the note offers guiding principles, an analytical framework and a set of proposed programmatic outcomes and outputs.

Access it here

Uruguay | Ethical Pact against Disinformation

The UNDP Country Office in Uruguay, following the sensitization initiative, An electoral campaign free of false news, implemented in collaboration with UNESCO, the Uruguay Press Association and the Fundación Astur, facilitated a process of dialogue with national political parties which resulted in the signing of the Ethical Pact against Disinformation. The Pact, originally agreed for the 2019 national elections, was reaffirmed for the local elections in 2020.

More info here

Peru | The Ama LLulla network

In the context of the 2021 general elections, UNDP Peru facilitated the creation of Ama LLulla (‘Don’t lie’ in Quechua) the first collaborative fact-checking network in the country, open to all media outlets regardless of their editorial line. This initiative was complemented by an international forum on information verification and democracy organized in collaboration with the news agency EFE, as well as a series of Verificazo workshops for communications students aimed at supporting the creation of a network of fact-checking volunteers.

More info here and here
Innovation focus | Machine learning for fact-checking

iVerify and eMonitor+ are information monitoring platforms developed by UNDP to combat the spread of false narratives and hate speech during election periods (and beyond) by combining artificial intelligence and machine learning with in-person fact-checking. The platforms provide national actors with a support package to enhance identification, monitoring and response capacity to threats to information integrity. The support package includes digital tools, capacity-building modules, partnership opportunities, and communication and outreach strategies.

More info on iVerify [here](#) and on eMonitor+ [here](#)

Innovation focus | Promoting a ‘Healthy Internet’ through citizen participation

UNDP Accelerator Labs in Argentina, Iraq, Kenya, Lebanon, Morocco, Namibia, Sudan and Togo have been collaborating with the Healthy Internet Project, an initiative incubated at TED, to test an easy-to-use browser extension that identifies harmful content through crowdsourced moderation. Content flagged through the extension is collected in a database accessible to journalists, technology companies, and local thought leaders.

More info [here](#)
Addressing information fragmentation

This workstream centers on efforts to address the fragmentation of information ecosystems. It involves, among other things, dialogue with media outlets, professional organizations for journalists, regulators and other key actors regarding practices that may fuel extreme polarization, as well as the means to effectively counteract them (including the possibility of collaborative journalism). It also involves engagement with Internet companies and a range of other relevant stakeholders on how microtargeting (particularly in the context of political communication) and algorithmic content curation within social media can deepen echo chambers and distort public debate. Capacity building for content creators and curators on how to be mindful of relevant social cleavages, and how to produce content that is respectful of diversity, can also be an important aspect of this work.

Iraq | The ‘Diversity’ platform

In Iraq, under the Citizen Journalism project, UNDP has facilitated the establishment of the Diversity platform to make information content with a focus on reconciliation available to a range of audiences across social and political divides. As part of this initiative, 120 journalists, bloggers and social media activists received tailor-made capacity-building sessions on topics such as conflict-sensitive reporting and social cohesion.

More info here

Lebanon | Journalist Pact for Civil Peace

The UNDP Country Office in Lebanon facilitated the signing of the Journalist Pact for Strengthening Civil Peace by 34 media outlets. Among other things, the Pact recognizes the role of media in preventing sectarianism and promoting social cohesion. This engagement also led to the creation of a Peacebuilding Supplement inserted into leading newspapers as a space for intercommunal exchange.

More info here and here

Georgia | Monitoring media coverage of elections

Since 2010, UNDP has been supporting an alliance of civil society organizations – the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, Internews-Georgia and the Caucasus Research Resource Centers – in carrying out media monitoring around elections with a focus on assessing the impartiality and balance of reporting. This monitoring has not only contributed to the integrity of electoral processes but also spurred public dialogue on the role of media vis-à-vis polarization dynamics.

More info here

Innovation focus | Role of large Internet platforms on the information ecosystem

In Uruguay, UNDP collaborated with OBSERVACOM to develop a study on the impact of large Internet platforms on the information ecosystem and the quality of public deliberation. The study, which includes recommendations for action at both the national and international levels, was presented in December 2021 to the Uruguayan parliament, whose Bicameral Futures Commission subsequently established a process to follow up on this debate.

More info here
Culture and education for constructive engagement

Overview of entry points

UNDP can foster openness and inclusion in the public sphere by encouraging transformational leadership, as well as by promoting a shared culture of constructive engagement across segments of society. This work, which will be especially critical in contexts of high polarization, fragility and conflict, should place an especially strong emphasis on the values of pluralism and reasoned dialogue. Furthermore, UNDP can implement capacity-building initiatives aimed at helping people gain the skills they need in order to effectively interact with state institutions and to navigate information ecosystems. Civic education and media and information literacy will often be natural entry points in this field.
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Priority area 3 – Key definitions

Just like physical spaces, spaces of social interaction are shaped, reproduced and transformed by the practices of those operating in them. For this reason, in order to remain viable over the long term, an open and inclusive public sphere needs the ongoing, constructive engagement of citizens.

There are, of course, many ways to interpret ‘constructive’ in relation to civic engagement, including several that are not necessarily consistent with the notions of openness and inclusion described in the previous sections. In order to clarify the scope of the concept, we adopt the following working definition:

Constructive civic engagement
‘Constructive’ in relation to civic engagement is not seen as synonymous with ‘soft’ or ‘conciliatory.’ In fact, civic engagement may be fiercely adversarial, or pursue highly controversial goals, but remain fundamentally ‘constructive’ to the extent that it fulfills three conditions: (1) it accepts the public good (as opposed to strictly sectarian interest) as the shared frame of reference of public debate; (2) it is fundamentally committed to evidence and reason as the primary foundations of public decision making; and (3) it is unconditionally peaceful, respectful of alternative points of view and accepting of pluralism in society.30

Cultural and educational systems can have a significant impact on the quality of citizens’ practices in the public sphere. While there are many dimensions to this relation, for the purposes of the present document we will focus on three domains: value systems, cognitive skills and social skills, which are defined as follows:

Value systems
Systems of beliefs regarding what is valuable or desirable, including beliefs regarding the appropriate types of conduct in different contexts of social life.

Cognitive skills
A range of competencies that enable people to understand the world surrounding them.

Social skills
A range of competencies that enable people to interact and communicate with others.

30 Varieties of Democracies uses a similar conceptual framing in describing the notion of deliberative democracy by noting that “a deliberative process is one in which public reasoning focused on the common good motivates political decisions—as contrasted with emotional appeals, solidary attachments, parochial interests, or coercion. According to this principle, democracy requires more than an aggregation of existing preferences. There should also be respectful dialogue at all levels—from preference formation to final decision—among informed and competent participants who are open to persuasion.” https://www.v-dem.net.
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Possible workstreams

Transformational leadership for openness and inclusion

One component of this workstream is advocacy and dialogue work aimed at encouraging representatives of state institutions to take action as champions of an open and inclusive public sphere, not only through their policy choices but also in their communication and broader professional practice. This work requires engagement with different levels of leadership within the public sector – among holders of elective office as well as the civil service – to articulate the case for an open and inclusive public sphere. It also involves strengthening the capacity of representatives of public institutions to act as facilitators of informed and constructive dialogue in the context of their functions. A complementary element of this workstream is engagement with the business sector, both in terms of how business practices impact people’s access to information and civic engagement opportunities, and in terms of how the business sector can be an advocate for openness and inclusion in the public sphere.

South Africa | Transformational leadership training for public sector representatives

In South Africa, UNDP collaborated with the National School of Government and the Thembekile Mandela Foundation to roll out the Leading Like Mandela Leadership Programme, which seeks to cultivate a cadre of thought leaders embracing leadership qualities and values inspired by the life of Nelson Mandela, including selflessness, inclusivity, transformation, accountability and self-application.

More info [here](#)

Africa | Engagement with political parties

Engagement with political parties is an important component of UNDP’s work in the area of governance. This engagement takes place in the context of dedicated political party strengthening projects such as the Joint Party Support and Strengthening Project in Ghana, in the framework of initiatives to support overall reform of national governance, such as the Programme of Renewal and Enhancement of the Governance Architecture in Lesotho, or as part of broader electoral cycle support, as in the case of electoral projects in Liberia and Malawi.

More info on Ghana [here](#), on Lesotho [here](#), on Liberia [here](#), on Malawi [here](#).
Asia Pacific | Citizen-oriented civil service reform

Several civil service reform initiatives implemented by UNDP seek to promote a culture of citizen engagement and dialogue among civil servants through the promotion of attitudinal shifts and training in facilitation skills. For instance, in Mongolia, UNDP is supporting a citizen-centric reform of civil service, while in Cambodia, the Country Office has been working with the National School of Local Administration to develop a curriculum on civic engagement as part of the project Towards Inclusive and Participatory Governance.

More info on Mongolia [here](#) and on Cambodia [here](#)

Asia Pacific | Business sector and civic space

UNDP is one of the co-conveners of the UN Responsible Business and Human Rights Forum, Asia-Pacific, a multi-stakeholder platform that seeks to promote dialogue and peer-learning on how to strengthen responsible business and human rights in the Asia-Pacific region. The protection of civic space and human rights defenders was one of the issues covered during the 2021 session of the Forum in a session entitled, Safeguarding Civic Space: Business Supporting Human Rights Defenders to Safeguard the Environment.

More info [here](#) and [here](#)
Promoting a culture of constructive engagement

The primary objective of this workstream is to promote the values, attitudes and behaviours that support an open and inclusive public sphere, including a commitment to human rights, civic-mindedness, critical thinking, respect for different points of view and a culture of peaceful resolution of conflict. In this context, a significant area of priority will often be preventing and addressing hate speech. UNDP can contribute to efforts in this area by engaging with many segments of society and through a number of channels, including by facilitating multi-stakeholder alliances with the participation of public institutions, the educational sector, media and civil society actors as well as actors with a significant potential impact on public opinion and attitudes.

Lebanon | Fighters for Peace

Through the project, Peace Building in Lebanon, UNDP has been supporting Fighters for Peace, an association that brings together former civil war fighters from different political, religious and social backgrounds. The members of Fighters for Peace engage in different awareness-raising activities through which they share their stories and experiences as a way to create spaces for dialogue on peace, tolerance and reconciliation.

More info here

Innovation focus | Behavioral insights for a culture of constructive engagement

UNDP has been collaborating with other parts of the UN system to develop guidance on how to leverage behavioural insights in the context of Agenda 2030. Research in behavioural science can shed light on how people develop beliefs and attitudes, make decisions and act on them, and think about, influence, and relate to one another. As such, it can provide valuable inputs on efforts to promote a culture of constructive civic engagement.

Access the guidance here

Thailand | The ‘You Me We Us’ online exhibition

You Me We Us is an online exhibition of stories from people belonging to different ethnic groups developed by the UNDP Country Office in Thailand, in collaboration with several national partners. You Me We Us invites the viewer to connect with people of different ethnicities through stories of their everyday lives, challenges, limitations and cultural traditions. Most stories are shared from the perspectives of the individuals involved.

More info here

Innovation focus | Data powered positive deviance

The positive deviance approach is based on the observation that, in any community, there are people that practice uncommon but highly effective strategies that enable them to better tackle a certain issue. This approach can be applied to multiple fields, including the investigation of successful experiences of civic engagement and civic organizing. The UNDP Accelerator Labs Network, in collaboration with the GIZ Data Lab and the University of Manchester, developed a step-by-step handbook on how to apply the positive deviance method in the framework of the Data Powered Positive Deviance Alliance.

Access the handbook here
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Trinidad and Tobago | Positive deviance and social change in at-risk areas

In Trinidad and Tobago, the initiative Youth Peer Mentorship Project to Promote Civic Engagement and its successive iterations used a positive deviance approach to establish a cadre of youth mentors and peace ambassadors in at-risk areas. Tapping into resources and strategies from within the community and complementing them with tailored programmes of personal development, the project successfully supported youths participating in the initiative to become role models and catalysts for change.

More info here and here

Kyrgyzstan | Exploring citizen-powered community development

The UNDP Accelerator Lab in Kyrgyzstan, as part of an initiative entitled, Citizen-empowered community development, supported a participatory mapping of successful experiences of civic activism and community self-organizing across the country (including several innovative approaches blending traditional forms of mutual support with digital tools). Through this process, the Lab was able to identify and support portfolios of experiments to increase citizen engagement in community development.

More info here

Photo: UNDP South Sudan
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Education for participation

Activities in this workstream revolve around ensuring that citizens have access to the knowledge they need to understand how governance systems function and effectively interact with public institutions. These activities may have a very broad focus, such as education on constitutional provisions and the rights and responsibilities that they establish. Alternatively, they may deal with more specific issues, such as how to present a popular initiative, where to find information about local budgets or what the requirements are to legally organize a demonstration. Much of this work will happen within the school system, but UNDP is well-positioned to bring it beyond schools through a range of strategies. Often, civic education activities will be implemented in the context of elections, but promising entry points can be identified across different areas of governance. In addition, efforts in this workstream can extend to creating an infrastructure that allows citizens to obtain rigorous but accessible information on complex policy issues and matters of public concern.

South Africa | Democracy on Stage

In South Africa, UNDP and Front Row Studios developed Democracy on Stage, a mobile industrial theatre production about democracy created by youths, for youths. Originally conceived to encourage young people to participate in the 2021 Local Government Elections, the play addresses a range of issues faced by South African youths and emphasizes the value of active citizenship. Democracy on Stage has been touring the country since its launch, and in its first week alone reached over 1,500 youth in six provinces. In addition, the Country Office supported a programme championed by Activate! Change Drivers to advance civic education across the country, including through a civic education toolkit.

More info on Democracy on Stage here and on the toolkit here

Chile | 12 Keys for Civic Education

In Chile, UNDP worked with UNESCO to develop the report, Twelve keys to strengthen citizenship education in Chile. The report, which is built on UNDP’s and UNESCO’s combined experience in both the governance and the education sector, offers several elements to support the development of policies with a focus on three areas: (1) conceptual frameworks; (2) structure and organization of the civic education system; and (3) pedagogical practices.

More info here

Samoa | National Digital Library

As part of the Samoa Knowledge Society Initiative, the UNDP Country Office supported the creation of the National Samoa Digital Library. The Library serves as a user-friendly, localized knowledge e-platform, providing access to full text, bibliographical and institutional information from Samoa and international sources. This platform is complemented by a Lifelong Learning Lab and a Research repository.

More info here
Philippines | People’s Public Finance Institutes

In the Philippines, UNDP collaborated with Social Watch and national universities to establish three People’s Public Finance Institutes. These are centres where private citizens and representatives of civil society organizations can learn about different aspects of public finance at the local level (including budgeting, revenue administration, expenditures and procurement processes and audit procedures) but also find out about ways to get involved in expenditure monitoring and other social accountability initiatives.

More info [here](#)
Promoting an open and inclusive public sphere
Programmatic options • Priority area 3

Media and information literacy

This workstream focuses on ensuring that citizens have the competencies required to effectively navigate the information ecosystem. Work in this area includes providing information users with the knowledge and analytical skills they need to contextualize, interpret and probe media content, but also to engage in a process of self-reflection on their own role within the information ecosystem, including in relation to the spread of inaccurate information and the hardening of information bubbles. Increasingly, this work will involve raising awareness of the specific dynamics inherent in the functioning of social media (including their technological foundations and business models). UNDP can promote media and information literacy within a number of programmatic areas – most obviously in the context of work on information pollution and information fragmentation, but also in other areas of governance (such as electoral assistance) and initiatives on digital transformation.

Lebanon | ‘Count to Ten’ campaign

In Lebanon, UNDP launched the Count to Ten campaign in partnership with LBCI TV station to promote critical thinking and public awareness of the risks of disinformation. The campaign involved infographic videos disseminated widely on social media, including contributions by local influencers, as well as a series of infomercials broadcast on national TV stations, in parallel with an outdoor campaign.

More info here

Uruguay | ‘Your rights on the internet’ campaign

UNDP Uruguay and OBSEVACOM launched the campaign, Your Rights on the Internet, a digital campaign to inform and educate people on the terms of service and community standards for content moderation on three of the main Internet social networks (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube). Through this initiative, citizens receive information on how content moderation is performed and how it can impact access to information and freedom of expression.

More info here
Promoting an open and inclusive public sphere
Programmatic options • Priority area 4

Promoting equal participation in the public sphere

Overview of entry points

UNDP can contribute to the full inclusion of all members of society in the public sphere by addressing legal and cultural barriers impeding the participation of specific population segments. Additional efforts may include promoting accessibility (in a broad sense) of the public sphere and strengthening the individual and collective capacities of historically marginalized communities. Groups within the scope of this work include, but are not limited to, women, young people, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, LGBTI+ people, ethnic minorities, migrants, refugees and displaced people. Very deliberate efforts should be made, however, to take into account and address the intersectional nature of different forms of exclusion.

Key areas of work

Addressing legal barriers
Promoting accessibility
Addressing cultural barriers
Dedicated capacity building

Photo: UNDP Philippines
Promoting an open and inclusive public sphere
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Priority area 4 – Key definitions

Ensuring full inclusion in the public sphere requires that all people can have access to quality information, as well as opportunities for meaningful participation on an equal basis with others. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to address direct forms of discrimination, defined as follows:

Direct discrimination
Differential treatment of a group or person, based on certain characteristics of that group or person, which results in disadvantage.\(^{31}\)

However, it is also important to recognize that certain norms and practices, while not explicitly discriminatory, can systematically disadvantage some people because of certain characteristics that they share, thus causing indirect discrimination.

An important concept in thinking about ways to address indirect discrimination is accessibility, which is understood, for the purposes of this note, as follows:

Accessibility
The quality of a space or process that allows for equally meaningful engagement on the part of different sets of people.\(^{32}\)

The promotion of accessibility in the public sphere can be combined with dedicated capacity support in order to address different forms of indirect discrimination.

As individuals have multiple identities, they may be experiencing compounded discrimination. This phenomenon is captured by the concept of intersectionality.

Intersectionality
The complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination combine, overlap, or intersect. Taking intersectionality into account is indispensable to effectively address exclusion dynamics.

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31 Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. Article 2 sets out various prohibited grounds of discrimination stating that: “Everyone is entitled to all rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status […].” However, by adding “other status” to the list of prohibited grounds, the Declaration recognizes that these grounds may change over time, and that no list of prohibited grounds can be exhaustive. Other grounds on which people are often discriminated against include age, disability status, indigenous status, sexual orientation, gender identity, and migration status.

32 This definition draws from the disability context, where accessibility refers to a situation in which people are not excluded from using and participating in something on the basis of experiencing a disability but expands the concept to multiple expressions of human diversity.
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Possible workstreams

Addressing legal barriers

The focus of this workstream is addressing barriers to full inclusion in the public sphere, which are grounded in legislation or other formal regulatory provisions. Some of the barriers covered under this area of work include provisions introducing discriminatory requirements to participate in certain aspects of public life (for instance based on age or migratory status), provisions that automatically subject certain population groups to the full loss of legal capacity (as in the case of persons experiencing intellectual disability or mental health conditions), or provisions resulting in the criminalization of certain population groups (such as laws criminalizing HIV transmission, same sex sexual acts, sex work and drug use). UNDP can contribute to the removal of such barriers, among other things, by highlighting their inconsistency with countries’ human rights commitments, documenting their negative impact on society, offering information on alternative approaches successfully implemented in other contexts, and facilitating broad-based policy dialogue with the participation of those experiencing discrimination.

Various | Regulatory frameworks for effective HIV responses

Since 2012, UNDP in collaboration with the United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS has been supporting the Global Commission on HIV and the Law in shedding light on legislation that criminalizes HIV transmission, dehumanizes those at risk and restricts the actions of civil society organizations. Building on the Commission’s findings, UNDP has been supporting countries around the world in reforming discriminatory laws and promoting the meaningful participation of people living with HIV in national responses.

More info here

Resource | A handbook for parliamentarians on LGBTI+ rights

The publication Advancing the Human Rights and Inclusion of LGBTI People: A Handbook for Parliamentarians jointly produced by UNDP and Parliamentarians for Global Action sets out relevant international standards and highlights the role of parliamentarians in promoting and protecting the rights of LGBTI+ people. The document offers practical tips, tools and resources designed to support parliamentarians to undertake legislative, representational and oversight activities that advance the rights and inclusion of LGBTI+ people.

Access it here
Resource | A handbook for parliamentarians on the rights of indigenous peoples

The publication, *Implementing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Handbook for Parliamentarians*, produced by UNDP in collaboration with other components of the UN system, aims to enable parliamentarians to better understand indigenous peoples’ rights and to provide ideas for the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights on Indigenous Peoples. It also presents good practices in relation to the recognition and exercise of indigenous peoples’ rights in different regions of the world.

Access it [here](#).

Innovation focus | Innovative measurement approaches for dialogue on discrimination

UNDP in collaboration with the World Bank and civil society partners developed an LGBTI+ Inclusion Index to measure development outcomes for LGBTI+ people and inform policies, programmes and investments for strengthening LGBTI+ inclusion and rights. The index is based on a set of 51 indicators in several areas, including civil and political participation.

More info [here](#).
Addressing cultural barriers

This workstream centers on removing barriers to full inclusion in the public sphere that result from cultural norms, attitudes and beliefs. Examples of such barriers are patriarchal views about the role of women in society, preconceived notions and stereotypes about the ability of certain groups to meaningfully contribute to public life (as for instance in the case of persons with disabilities), and suspicion towards the motives of certain population segments, often rooted in histories of stigmatization, hostility, and misunderstanding. Activities to address cultural barriers will often include different forms of public communication and dialogue (increasingly based on behavioural research). Collaboration with different actors in the education system as well as a range of opinion leaders will also often be part of work in this area. Another important potential intervention is creating opportunities for groups experiencing discrimination to offer their perspectives and share their experiences in the public domain in order to challenge misconceptions and promote attitude change.

Viet Nam | Transforming attitudes towards persons with disabilities

In Viet Nam, UNDP conducted a study on stigma and discrimination against persons with disabilities to support evidence-based public debate and policy reform on this issue. At the same time, UNDP and Will to Live launched a media-training programme for persons with disabilities to equip them with communication and journalism skills for rights-based reporting. As a result, four short documentary films were produced, vividly reflecting the lives and aspiration of persons with disabilities in Viet Nam.

More info here

Thailand | Communicating diversity

As part of the project Promoting Tolerance and Diversity in Asia, UNDP Thailand supported the design of a series of workshops with a focus on communicating diversity. During these workshops, stateless young people and young people from ethnic minorities received training on addressing harmful narratives and stereotypes by creating engaging content that can build a better understanding of their identities, cultures and traditions among the general public.

More info here

Georgia | Addressing sexist hate speech in social media

In Georgia, recognizing that discriminatory, sexist and abusive language in social media is one of the main barriers to women’s participation in public life, UNDP has been working with Georgian civil society organizations to develop a methodology to uncover gender-based verbal abuse in the online space, thus bringing this critical issue to the limelight.

More info here
Promoting accessibility

The primary objective of this workstream is to ensure that spaces and processes that are relevant to the public sphere are accessible to all relevant segments of the population. Accessibility, in this sense, can be achieved in a variety of ways. For instance, it may involve addressing certain features of the physical space impacting persons experiencing mobility impairment. Or it may require translation and interpretation services for persons belonging to linguistic minorities. In some cases, accessibility in the public sphere may be secured through appropriate considerations in the design of spaces and processes conceived for the general public. In some cases, however, it may be best achieved through the creation of dedicated information channels and participation venues. UNDP can contribute to the accessibility of the public sphere by, among other things, conducting analysis of how specific features of the public sphere may lead to exclusion, providing technical assistance in reversing these features, and facilitating the participation of people experiencing exclusion in the codesign of relevant spaces and processes.

Latin America | Indigenous peoples, self-organizing and participation in public life

In Latin America, UNDP has been supporting indigenous communities in the construction of autonomous spaces of self-organization, as for instance in the case of Bolivia, where the Country Office provided assistance to the operationalization of the Autonomía Indígena Originaria Campesina. In addition, UNDP implemented initiatives to promote indigenous participation in a broad range of public decision-making processes at both local and national levels. In Chile, for instance, the Country Office worked with OHCHR to ensure the meaningful and informed involvement of indigenous communities in the ongoing constitutional reform process.

More info on Bolivia [here](#) and on Chile [here](#)

Innovation focus | Ethnographies of participation

UNDP’s Accelerator Lab in Mexico engaged with a team of sociologists, anthropologists and filmmakers to carry out an ethnographic exploration of a consultation process with indigenous communities, carried out by the government in the context of the Program for the Development of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. By documenting the consultation process from the point of view of the participating communities, the study contributed to a better understanding of what will be required to create trust and collaboration in the context of the proposed initiative, and delivered a number of insights that will be useful in the design of future consultations.

More info [here](#)

Various | Young people and the remaking of physical spaces of participation

As part of the FutureMakers programme, implemented together with UN Volunteers and EdgeRyders, UNDP has been supporting new forms of collaboration between public authorities and young people with a focus on reimagining physical spaces of social interaction and participation. Youth-led reimagining projects were implemented as a result of this initiative in Armenia, Egypt and Georgia.

More info [here](#)
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Laos | Accessibility of information: community radio stations

In Laos, the UNDP Country Office has facilitated the creation of a network of 12 community radio stations that, with the support of close to 200 community radio volunteers, have reached an estimated 600,000 people in their own languages. The network has provided a platform for people in rural and remote areas to receive information relevant to their needs and interests, but also express their thoughts and issues, share knowledge and validate their culture in the process.

More info here

Peru | Accessibility of information: fact-checking service in indigenous languages

In an effort to promote inclusive access to verified information, the Ama LLulla fact-checkers network – created in Peru with UNDP’s support – has made fact-checking available in indigenous languages (Asháninka and Quechua). In addition, specific strategies were developed to reach populations in remote areas of the country, including diffusion through 15 regional radios.

More info here

Photo: UNDP Jordan
Dedicated capacity building

The main focus of this workstream is strengthening the individual and collective capacities of population groups that have historically experienced discrimination. At an individual level, capacity-strengthening activities may involve more traditional forms of knowledge transfer, such as training or mentoring, but also more experiential types of learning, potentially including enrollment in leadership development programmes or UN Volunteers placements. At the collective level, a key priority area is the strengthening of organizations representing discriminated groups. This could be achieved through a number of strategies, which may include, among others, organizational development support and assistance in alliance-building. In most cases, UNDP will work through national partners in its support of groups that have historically experienced discrimination, but in some cases may also provide capacity strengthening.

**Serbia | Social inclusion of young Roma**

In Serbia, UNHCHR and UNDP have been implementing the project, *Local Initiatives for Improved Social Inclusion of Young Roma*, which provides young Roma with training and, through a UN Youth Volunteers scheme, placement opportunities in a range of public institutions and civil society organizations. An association of young volunteers emerged from the project as a network of 65 young Roma men and women. This association is contributing to improving the representation of Roma in different aspects of public life.

More info here

**Cambodia | Supporting organizations of persons with disabilities**

As part of a comprehensive programme to promote disability inclusion in Cambodia, UNDP has worked with organizations representing persons with disabilities to strengthen their capacity to engage in advocacy and dialogue with local authorities. This contributed, among other things, to the greater participation of persons with disabilities in the definition of commune investment plans at the municipal level.

More info here

**Sahel | Peace through women’s leadership and participation**

Under the project, *Building an Inclusive Post COVID-19 Recovery, Crises Transitions and Governance*, UNDP supported the establishment of National Women Coalitions in four West African countries (Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, Mali and Niger). The Coalitions, each represented by 30 women leaders, have led advocacy and policy dialogue on how women’s leadership and participation in different aspects of public life can contribute to peace and security.

More info here
Various | Youth leadership development programmes

UNDP is supporting the implementation of regional youth development programmes in both Africa and the Arab States. In Africa, YouthConnekt operates as a regional platform with the vision of connecting African youth for socio-economic transformation, including through the development of regional network of civic leaders. In the Arab States, the Youth Leadership Development Programme has reached over 20,000 youth participants and supported over 5,000 projects, focused on fostering social innovation for the SDGs, with a strong emphasis on gender equality.

More info on YouthConnekt [here](#) and on the Youth Leadership Development Programme [here](#).