

Event Summary – Informal Online Exchange Ahead of CSO-UN Dialogue

Stretching What's Possible: Civil Society Shaping a More Transformative Multilateralism for Peace and Human Rights

[Conductive Space for Peace \(CSP\)](#) convened a virtual exchange, “Stretching What’s Possible: Civil Society Shaping a More Transformative Multilateralism for Peace and Human Rights,” on December 3rd, 2025, ahead of the [2025 CSO–UN Dialogue on Peacebuilding in Geneva](#). The exchange drew interest from seventy registered Dialogue participants and other civil-society actors from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe and the Americas interested in how civic actors and multilateral institutions can work together in new ways. This note is a summary of the insights that emerged through short provocations and group discussions, including areas of challenges, uncertainties and questions that merit continued exploration as enter the Dialogue.

Signals and shifts in civic space and multilateral cooperation

Participants reflected on the changing landscape of civic action and multilateral cooperation around peace and human rights. Across regions, several shared signals emerged that point to how the ecosystem is evolving, and where new opportunities and dilemmas are taking shape.

- **From “access to the room” towards building our own civic infrastructures.** There is recognition that civic actors are experimenting with translocal alliances, coordination councils and community-rooted infrastructures that can set agendas, with institutions in observer or enabling roles. According to one participant, *“it is okay for the UN to be observers. Communities know what is needed.”*
- **Beyond funding as the marker of legitimacy.** With shrinking and volatile aid flows, the presence or absence of UN or donor funding is a weak marker of credibility. Other bases of legitimacy such as community-rooted mandates, peer accountability, grounded expertise and new forms of recognition are rising in importance. This raised a reflection on whether multilateral actors could explore non-financial avenues of acknowledgement and support such as an adapted accreditation, especially where formal partnerships are constrained.
- **Regional, ‘minilateral’ and translocal arenas as power-builders.** Regional bodies, coalitions of the willing and cross-border platforms are increasingly influential spaces where norms and leverage are shaped, often with more room for manoeuvre than at UN headquarters. In parallel, as conflicts are driven by regional and international dynamics, there is a risk that civil society remains confined to local peace efforts and swept away by larger geopolitical waves unless new influence is built at these levels.
- **Shrinking formal civic space, expanding informal and care-centred spaces.** Restrictive laws, securitisation and targeting of activists continue to close formal participation channels. Meanwhile, informal, digital and care-centred organising spaces are expanding, often quietly, at personal cost. A practitioner working with women activists captured this tension *“amazing young people, healers and human-rights documenters, so burned out, they need a place to reconnect.”*
- **Fragmentation and competition vs. connection and solidarity.** Severe competition for resources and fragmented mandates continue to strain collaboration among civil-society organisations. Yet new, leaner forms collaborative structures based on of solidarity, rooted in shared principles are emerging. One insight captured the moment starkly as: *“de-fragmentation is happening through dehumanisation, we have to counter it through connection and trust.”*

Implications and invitations for the CSO–UN Dialogue and beyond

The exchange surfaced areas that civil society actors could strengthen, alongside roles and responsibilities that naturally sit with UN entities and government actors who shape the multilateral environment.

What civil society can look to

- **Bringing infrastructures and practices into the room, not just projects.** Spaces such as the Dialogue in Geneva offer opportunities to highlight concrete examples of civic infrastructures already shaping peace and human rights work, including regional councils, women’s and youth platforms, faith-based alliances, and local coordination committees. Presenting these as strategic counterparts rather than consultation lists can widen the imagination of what collaboration with institutions can look like.
- **Naming asks and commitments.** Clarity on what is needed from the UN and government actors such as protection, resourcing, political backing is strengthened when accompanied by civil society’s own commitments. These include strengthening self-organising, sharing power, supporting care and healing, and holding each other accountable across regions and sectors.
- **Investing in own infrastructures and solidarities.** Regional, translocal and community-rooted spaces remain essential for civic actors to define priorities and practise shared governance without institutional filters. Treating the UN as one reference point among several, not the centre of gravity can help diversify pathways for influence and protection.
- **Hold together “plan A” and “plan B”.** Engagement with multilateral processes continues to matter for norm setting, resourcing, and protection. At the same time, strengthening self-organised alternatives creates resilience when institutions retreat or are unable to respond. As one person noted, *“we’re knocking on the doors, but also working on plan B: self-organisation across communities, so if you don’t help us, we can do it ourselves.”*

What the UN system and government actors can look to

- **Move from participation to shared power.** Go beyond invitations and speaking slots. Meaningful collaboration involves sharing space in agenda setting, co design of processes, follow up mechanisms and roles in implementation and oversight. These shifts signal recognition of civic actors as partners in shaping outcomes, not only contributors to consultations.
- **Resource long-term civic infrastructures, not only short projects.** Many of the civic platforms that strengthen peacebuilding and human rights work rely on long-term organising, convening and translocal coordination. Adjusting funding and risk frameworks to meet these ways of working could hold significant benefits in strengthening resilience and effectiveness.
- **Recognise a wider spectrum of civic actors.** Civic leadership is exercised by informal movements, self-organised collectives, communities without legal status, actors in areas with limited government presence, and those organising in digital spaces. Expanding who is acknowledged and engaged with as “civil society” can help institutions keep pace with where legitimacy and problem-solving capacity are actually located.
- **Be transparent about constraints.** Open dialogue with civil society about political and financial constraints, institutional crises, procedural constraints and trade-offs can create space for more realistic expectations and shared problem solving. Transparency also helps civil society calibrate its strategies and identify where influence or collaboration can be most effective.

Questions to carry forward

Alongside these reflections the exchange also surfaces many questions that merit further exploration by the civil society, the UN and government counterparts during the Dialogue and beyond.

Questions for civil society to hold

- How can we organise in ways that centre care, connection and healing, not only productivity, especially in contexts marked by trauma, burnout and dehumanisation?
- What kinds of civic infrastructures such as assemblies, councils, hubs, federations, faith-based and youth networks could better connect local, diaspora and translocal actors without reproducing the hierarchies and competition seen in the aid system?
- How do we sustain radical or experimental spaces while influencing institutions when needed, and how do we make the case for investment in these spaces rather than short-term support?
- When we choose to engage UN or regional processes, what does meaningful engagement look like beyond set-piece interventions, and when do we risk legitimising processes that are not yet ready to shift?

Questions for UN and state actors to hold

- If participation is not the same as power-sharing, what specific decisions, resources or rules could be opened to genuine shared governance with civic actors?
- How might funding and risk frameworks be redesigned so that long-term civic infrastructures, protection, care work and translocal collaboration can be supported, including for actors outside formal NGOs?
- Who is consistently missing when “civil society” is invoked, and what would it take, in practical terms, to bring those actors into view and further leverage their insights and critical peacebuilding and human rights work?
- Beyond donor funding and Northern NGO endorsement, what other signals of legitimacy, such as community mandate, peer accountability or sustained presence in difficult contexts are you ready to recognise and strengthen?

Looking Ahead

These reflections do not speak for everyone who joined, nor for the wider ecosystem, but they do capture some of the energies, doubts and ambitions that surfaced in this moment. We hope they can serve as a small tool to deepen nuance and stretch discussions about what it means to embrace the future of civil society and multilateralism advancing peacebuilding and human rights. CSP will continue exploring these questions through its work on futures and civic space, building on its the [Charting Tomorrow: Recommendations for a United Nations Embracing the Future](#) report, the [Civil Society as Collective Freedom](#) essay and the [RESPACE initiative](#) on transformative scenarios for the future of global collaboration for peace. We welcome anyone who wishes to share reactions, challenge these ideas, or build on them together.