
Compendium of Principles for NGO Good Practice (2021)

Recommended by CoNGO to
Non-Governmental and Civil Society Organizations

(This Compendium of Principles for NGO Good Practice was approved on November 29, 2021 by the 27th General Assembly of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations held in New York and online. The Compendium was produced and submitted to the Assembly by the CoNGO Board which conducted consultations with CoNGO members, substantive NGO committees, and the wider civil society community. It is not intended to be a Rules Book, still less to imply sanctions. It is a guidance document drawn from experience over the years in relationships among and within NGOs, notably those that have a consultative relationship of any type within the United Nations System. It may be considered that the Compendium could be revised and updated every few years, to take account of evolving conditions and practice.)

A. INDEPENDENCE OF NGOs

A non-governmental organization can by definition not accept control of its policy, funding or staffing by any government or public authority, however well-disposed such authority may be to supporting and enabling civil society's role in public life.

Whether called NGO or CSO (other related names include Third Sector, Voluntary Agency, Extra-governmental Organization, Association, Community-based organization, Stakeholder, Non-state actor) the organization is a grouping of individuals exercising their right to freely hold and express opinions on public policy, to freely assemble, and to freely determine their internal structures and responsibilities. These fundamental freedoms, laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in subsequent UN Covenants, and in several regional Human Rights Conventions, are the incontrovertible bases of NGO Independence.

This Independence does not in itself imply opposition to government policies or decrees, nor defiance of just laws. It reflects the inalienable rights of individuals, on their own or collectively, to participate constructively in public policy deliberations, to contribute

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positively to decision-making by parliaments and authorities, and to hold governments to account and to ethical standards.

The Independence of NGOs is thus an inherent element of Democracy and a contributing factor to the Rule of Law, the bedrock of Human Rights and Social Justice. The Participatory Democracy embodied by the existence of active and responsible NGOs is thus a complement to Representative Democracy embedded in Parliaments that are freely and fairly elected on a recurring schedule. NGOs do not necessarily represent electorates, they above all represent good causes. (“NGOs are not just do-gooders; they are good doers”)

If governments want and expect citizens to trust them, then governments will have to demonstrate that they trust their citizens and independent citizens’ associations. This mutual trust has to be earned and maintained.

B. INDEPENDENCE VIS-VIS THE UNITED NATIONS

NGOs that are accredited to UN bodies or agencies are by nature committed to upholding and enhancing the goals and values of the United Nations Charter, and seek the same commitment from the UN member governments, all of whom have signed the Charter and are bound by its provisions.

While the principal NGO-UN consultative relationship is with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)—currently governed by ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31—there are many other types of relationship throughout the UN System: with Specialized Agencies (e.g. UNHCR, OHCHR, UNICEF, WHO, ILO, ITU), with Secretariat entities (e.g. UN Women, UNDGC, UNEP, UNDP, WFP), and with Convention Secretariats and Conferences of Parties.

The varied rules and regulations on consultation or cooperation or partnership established by one or other UN body must of course be observed by the NGO entering such a relationship, but this does not have the consequence of placing the NGO in a subservient position. The NGO retains its full independence and its right to the fundamental freedoms referred to in A above.

With rigour and respect, an NGO has not only the right but the duty, in fulfillment of its mandate, to freely express its opinion and its honest critical views of intergovernmental decisions and actions undertaken through the United Nations.

NGOs understand that “action by the United Nations” is largely action by the intergovernmental bodies that govern the UN System: such action must also be held by NGOs to the highest ethical standards, with accountability to citizens and citizens’ associations. NGOs must in practice be afforded access to and in UN System deliberations and drafting of decisions, up to and including UN General Assembly Treaties, Resolutions and Declarations.

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Competent and responsible NGO input to intergovernmental deliberative processes enhances the governmental output, rendering it more reality-based and implementable on the ground. It is thus good practice—and good sense—for NGOs to seek to forge constructive dialogue with governmental missions to the UN in all UN Centres, and with UN Secretariat officials at all levels.

Concomitantly, it is up to governments to facilitate, enhance and where appropriate formalize such opportunities for dialogue, and to faithfully implement decisions they have already made—for example, in abiding by ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31. Advocating conscientiously with governments for them to live up to their obligations and to enlarge civic space is an honourable and permanent duty for NGOs.

The UN System and NGOs are in effect interdependent, and the world gains by the meaningful application of that concept as a good practice. As a former UN Secretary General said, “For the United Nations, cooperation with civil society is not an option, it is a necessity.”

C. COOPERATION AMONG NGOs

Every competent and responsible NGO is working to promote “a good cause” (gender equality, preserving the environment, protecting and housing refugees, the rights of the elderly, quality education, human rights, and a thousand more); or to combat “an evil cause” (racism, trafficking, gender-based violence, and far too many more).

These advocacy and operational activities are individually and collectively essential for the ultimate achievement of social justice and human rights. Greater and faster progress would however be made if the manifold activities are not conducted in silos but are seen as building blocks for cross-sectoral cooperation, for mutual learning from experience (good and bad), and for reinforcing common goals.

Building critical mass at the UN level by making optimum use of NGO networks and platforms is key to being more effective. Competition among NGOs—for audience, for funding, for recognition, for personal advancement of leaders—should yield to consultation, cooperation and coordination focused on the primary interest of the peoples and communities we assist, protect, advance and/or serve.

What unites NGOs is more important than what divides us. This cardinal but simple principle is a clarion call today as we singly and collectively rally to achieve the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, a responsibility of every government, every organization and institution, and every human.

D. PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND STANDARDS

The individuals designated to represent an NGO are necessarily by their actions and words reflecting the values and aims of their organization. NGO representatives have the

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responsibility to be truthful, cooperative, transparent, protective of colleagues, respectful of confidentiality, non-oppressive, and committed in discussions to focus on ideas and principles rather than on personalities. They must evidently uphold both fiduciary integrity and the privacy of communications. NGO representatives will constantly be sensitive to issues of diversity, inclusivity, vulnerability, language capacity and accessibility, and to displaying mutual respect, including respect for health protocols. It is necessary to be accommodating to the constraints of group sessions such as space and time availability.

Discrimination, harassment, verbal abuse, humiliating terminology, aggressiveness, overweening personal attitudes, and patronizing or patriarchal mentalities have no place in the conduct of NGO representatives.

Appendix 1A to the Minutes of the 27th CoNGO General Assembly.

Approved unanimously on November 29, 2021 by the 27th General Assembly of CoNGO (Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations) held in New York City and online.

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