

# Advocating for financial justice at the United Nations



A toolkit prepared by Eurodad



eurodad  
european network on  
debt and development

# The United Nations System

The United Nations (UN) is a complex organisation. This toolkit helps civil society organisations (CSOs) to navigate its politics, structure and decision-making bodies. It focuses on financing for development and global economic governance, in particular relating to debt issues. This is the abridged version of a longer toolkit.

Each heading links to longer descriptions for those needing more in-depth information.\*

## The General Assembly

The most important body. Representatives of all 193 Member States, each with one vote. In session from September to December, and as required at other times.

## The UN Secretariat

The executive arm. Helps set the agenda for the UN's deliberative and decision-making bodies, and implements their decisions. The "Financing for Development Office," is of interest to CSOs. Around 20 staff prepare the UN International Financing for Development Forums and Conferences, and monitor the implementation of political commitments made.

## The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

Coordinates the economic and social work of the UN. Formulates policy recommendations, conducts studies, calls for international conferences and coordinates specialised programmes. The main UN body where civil society can get involved. NGOs can apply for ECOSOC accreditation allowing access to meetings and information.

## The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC)

Deals with the impact of economic and financial affairs on human rights. Much work is done through Independent Experts (IEs), including one on debt and human rights. The IEs usually work very closely with human rights groups and other NGOs, and consult civil society actors regularly.

## The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)

Intergovernmental body of the UN, dealing with trade, debt, investment, and development issues. Has traditionally taken a South perspective and worked in a complementary manner to the IMF, World Bank and WTO.

## The UN World Conferences and Summits

Conferences and summits convene governments, international institutions, NGOs and other civil society groups. While much of the UN's work takes place behind the scenes, these events get extensive media coverage all over the world.

# How decisions are made

Each Member State has an equal vote, so developing countries have a good chance to get their voices heard. The first step to ensure that a development perspective features strongly is to get the relevant mandates to the UN.

## Negotiating blocs at the UN

UN negotiations take place between blocs. These groups pre-agree positions among themselves and tend to shape UN negotiations, making them a key target for CSO advocacy.

### The G77 and China (G77)

Represents the developing countries 134 members (two thirds of the 193 Member States) – always has majority when ranks close.

### The Least Developed Countries (LDC)

Sub-group of the G77. 47 countries are classified as LDC so have a substantial number of votes in the General Assembly.

### The Small Island Developing States (SIDS)

Many SIDS are heavily indebted and affected by the consequences of climate change. They have formed the 37 nations-strong Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS).

### The European Union (EU)

The largest bloc of the 'global north'. 28 Member States give the EU a considerable amount of votes. It also has substantial political and economic weight. (See box)

### Single decision countries

Some single decision countries (e.g. the USA) are very powerful and influential. Sometimes single decision countries form informal blocs such as the JUSCANZ group: Japan, USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

## Shaping a joint EU position: The role of different EU institutions

The **European Commission** is the de facto executive branch of the EU. Commission staff will in most cases represent and speak on behalf of the EU in negotiations. It also convenes Member States to EU-internal negotiations and drafts proposals of joint EU positions.

The **European Parliament** is structured in different Committees. The Development Committee (DEVE) is in charge of development affairs, while financial issues may involve committees such as ECON. The Parliament is usually a progressive player. It makes proposals for the joint EU positions through mostly non-binding papers and resolutions. The Parliament consults CSOs on a regular basis.

The **Council of the EU** is a central body representing Member States and usually the one that negotiates the EU position for example, at a UN conference. The Council has been criticised for not being transparent and it has few or sometimes no formal ways through which CSOs can participate. However, the Presidency often organises hearings with CSOs on behalf of the Council.

### EU Member States

In capitals, CSOs have numerous ways to engage with their governments. In Brussels, they can approach their nation's Perm Reps – who represent their countries in the different configurations of the Council. On global level, CSOs can approach their UN Ambassador and diplomats in New York by telephone or meet their representatives and delegations in person.

# How negotiations are organised

## STEP 1

### **There is a draft text**

Prepared through secretariat  
OR chair of negotiations  
OR a Member State OR  
an individual delegate OR  
even a specially appointed  
facilitator. For Resolutions,  
one or several governments  
may sponsor a text which  
is then registered and  
circulated by the Secretariat  
as an official document.



## STEP 2

### **Delegations produce amendments**

The Secretariat produces a  
new draft highlighting areas  
of disagreement. The chair  
or facilitator then organises  
negotiating sessions to  
narrow down the differences  
between delegations.  
During these sessions,  
delegations are represented  
by senior officials who may  
seek guidance from their  
governments, thus creating  
an additional advocacy  
opportunity.



## STEP 3

Towards the end, delegations  
can trade concessions in  
order to reach a 'balanced  
text' – what they consider an  
acceptable outcome. If this  
process is successful, the  
text can be adopted through  
a consensus. Otherwise, the  
Chair calls for a vote.

## Outcomes of United Nations negotiations processes

Not all UN decisions carry the same weight. The main ones are:

### **Treaty, Agreement, Resolution, Protocol and Declaration.**

As a general rule, the more legally binding the outcome, the more difficult it is to get UN Member States to agree on it. Your advocacy strategy should balance the natural desire for the strongest possible outcome against the likelihood of achieving it – a legally binding outcome is usually the most effective, but the risk of negotiations failing with no outcome at all is high. The less binding agreements are easier to achieve, but they require substantial follow up work from CSOs when it comes to holding governments to account.

## How does a multilateral agreement enter into force internationally?

### **Adoption**

Upon finalizing the negotiation of text, a treaty will be first "adopted".

### **Signature**

A country begins a process of endorsing a treaty by "signing" it. This action is at times called "Signature Subject to Ratification, Acceptance or Approval".

### **Ratification, acceptance, or approval**

Action by which a nation specifies its assent to being bound by the treaty after completion of required national constitutional procedures for ratification or accession or approval depending on the country's legal system.

### **Entry into force**

Normally, multilateral treaties enter into force after an established period has elapsed subsequent to a set number of nations ratifying or acceding to the agreement. Some agreements have other terms that must be met so that it enters into force.

### **Accession**

This is the act by which a nation accepts to become a party to an agreement whose text has been negotiated, adopted and signed by other countries.

### **Withdrawal or denouncing**

Countries can (and do) withdraw or denounce themselves from some international agreements in accordance with the procedure set in that instruments.

Source: Felix Dodds and Jan Gustav Strandenaes (2018):  
How to lobby at Intergovernmental Meetings

# Financial justice: what has the UN done so far?

2009

## **The UNCTAD Principles on Promoting Responsible Sovereign Lending and Borrowing: Operationalizing the co-responsibility of creditors and debtors**

The PRSLP Principles got indirect adoption by governments. They outline criteria that creditors and debtors need to fulfil to avoid debt crises and illegitimate debts.

2011

## **The UNHRC Guiding Principles on Debt and Human Rights: The primacy of human rights over debt service**

These principles clarify that international human rights law requires governments to ensure the progressive realisation of human rights, even in times of crisis, and a minimal level of economic and social rights.

2015

## **UNCTAD Roadmap and Guide for Sovereign Debt Workouts: Outline for a fair debt workout process**

This aims to establish a new way for resolving sovereign debt crises that is fairer, faster and more effective than the mess we have seen in Greece and other cases recently. It suggests that a Debt Workout Institution is set up as part of the UN system.

2015

## **The UN Basic Principles on Sovereign Debt Restructuring: Improving debt workouts and preventing vulture funds litigation**

The G77 set up an Ad hoc Committee on Sovereign debt Restructuring Processes within the framework of the UN General Assembly. This was highly political. Several richer Member States, including most EU countries, boycotted the negotiations. The G77 eventually gave up the ambition of a UN Resolution by unanimous consensus. The result is the "Basic Principles", and a mandate to continue towards a legal framework.

2015

## **UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17: defines debt sustainability and restructuring as means of implementation**

The 17th goal has become known as the "means of implementation" goal, because it includes commitments on mobilising finance and reforming institutions which are essential to ensure that the previous 16 SDG goals can be implemented in practice.

The UN often lacks the power to enforce agreements. It depends on the political will of Member States to ensure agreements are implemented. Political impact must be created through advocacy and public pressure, even after agreements have been made.

## **The UN Financing for Development (FfD) Process**

Three Financing for Development summits led to a wide range of pledges on debt relief, responsible lending and debt crises resolution, but their implementation remains a challenge. The 2015 Addis Ababa outcome document renewed the call for further work on a global consensus for debtor and creditor responsibilities, and a vague call for a sovereign debt workout mechanism.

In order to strengthen the implementation of the FfD process, the UN holds an annual Forum every Spring at their headquarters in New York. Their mandate is to look at progress made and set out policy guidance and recommendations for action to UN member states. The FfD forums offer a large variety of opportunities for CSOs to engage.

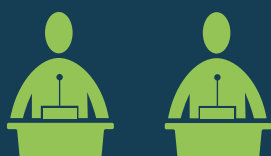
# CSO advocacy and participation: formal methods

## Apply for Consultative Status with ECOSOC

Often a prerequisite to get access to events, negotiations and consultations. If you are not working at the UN a lot, get your staff or activists 'adopted' into the delegation of an allied CSO that has the consultative status. The FfD-process has its own accreditation process. The UN Human Rights Council is relatively accessible, too. The UNCTAD has an accreditation process that is separate.

## Speaking on panels

Most UN processes include events and debates that are kicked off by expert panel presentations. Experts can include CSO reps and the design of panels is done by UN staff. So it doesn't do any harm to be well-connected with and known to UN staff. Where CSOs do not get (sufficient) space on panels, a letter to the Chairs or senior UN staff can sometimes change the situation.



## Participating in debates

CSOs can participate formally in many UN debates. At the annual FfD Forums there are three "NGO seats" and up to three NGO representatives per session can make an intervention of up to two minutes in length. Additional NGOs can observe the sessions in the room and can use the breaks to chat with their countries or other delegates. For the FfD process, the Addis Coordinating Group selects who should speak. Criteria includes: willingness, competence, knowledge, as well as regional and gender balance.



## Written submissions

Usually, UN processes are already well progressed before public negotiations start. Often a 'zero draft' of the outcome document is already available at that point. As the process continues, stakeholders can make additional submissions. Specific track-change comments, amendments or deletions can be made to the draft concerned, and negotiators usually go through it paragraph by paragraph.



## Side-events

Side-events are useful for discussing a certain issue in depth or when you want to get additional perspectives. Most major milestones in UN processes include the possibility to do side-events, including at the annual UN FfD Forums. Try to team up and co-organise the side-events with other CSOs and/or certain governments that you want to influence or that are allied to your cause. Side-events need to be formally registered.



## Expert Groups

Occasionally, the UN sets up expert groups mandated to produce specific outputs, or give more general policy advice to feed into the UN's work. CSO representatives are often invited to participate in these groups. Most of these groups are 'by invitation only' and it is usually UN staff who decide who is invited.

# CSO advocacy and participation: informal methods

## Approach Governments

The most important players in UN decision-making are governments. Some of those may be 'allies' and others 'blockers'. Some are 'swing states' that will take a position if they are convinced to do so. Work with all: strengthen allies, influence the swing states and make sure that the blockers do no harm.

- ▶ Send lobby letters to the head of state, minister or other relevant officials.
  - ▶ Organise lobby meetings with the ministry staff in charge.
  - ▶ Approach your delegation at the UN negotiating sessions, in the breaks or by setting up bilateral meetings.
  - ▶ Set up a meeting with embassy staff in New York or Geneva. Officers in your capital city are more likely to have substantial knowledge on the issue; diplomats in New York are more familiar with processes and political dynamics at the UN. It makes sense to work with both.

Bring a position paper and/or a recent research report on the issues discussed, so that your 'advocacy target' understands that you know what you are talking about. Have precise change objectives that you are advocating for.

## Working with the UN Secretariat staff

The UN Secretariat staff, don't have a formal role or rights in negotiation processes, but are often 'pulling the strings' and 'holding the pen'. They prepare reports, draft outcome documents, and provide information on previous agreements. They handle accreditation, design panels and speaker lists, and make logistical arrangements for events. Establishing contact with the Secretariat staff responsible for working with NGOs helps ensure that these processes work smoothly. They can also be an important source of intelligence.

## Working with the Press

Journalists cover major UN meetings. Media advocacy can be a useful strategy for mobilising public support, and for putting pressure on governments and official delegations.

- ▶ Issue press releases at key moments
- ▶ Approach journalists and offering to write opinion editorials (Op-Eds) or interviews
- ▶ Arrange press conferences. This is possible in UN facilities, which are also open to NGOs.



## The outsider strategy: make some noise

It is often effective to conduct an 'outsider' strategy in addition to the advocacy activities inside the building. Governments take CSOs more seriously when they understand that they can make a lot of noise on the street and in the media. Mass demonstrations have the best potential when there is a mass to mobilise. If resources are scarce, a little photogenic stunt outside the building can attract the media as they seek interesting visual material.

# FfD CSO processes

## The CSO FfD Group

CSOs have been involved in the Financing for Development (FfD) process from the very beginning. The coordination body is the CSO FfD Group.

The CSO FfD group is the main civil society body for information exchange on the UN FfD. This can include writing position papers and targeted statements, selecting speakers and allocating CSO representatives to sessions, doing joint evaluations of official papers and media work, among others,

The steering group is the Addis Ababa CSO Coordination Group (ACG), formed in October 2014. It holds regular conference calls to plan strategies and actions:  
**[addiscoordinatinggroup@googlegroups.com](mailto:addiscoordinatinggroup@googlegroups.com)**

The Rapid Response Group (RRG) is the place to be for the policy geeks. This group of policy experts analyse official documents and draft CSO responses:  
**[csoffdrapidresponsegroup@googlegroups.com](mailto:csoffdrapidresponsegroup@googlegroups.com)**

The whole CSO FfD Group contains about 400 CSOs, some far more active than others. The main tool for coordination and information exchange is their listserv:  
**[global-social-economy@googlegroups.com](mailto:global-social-economy@googlegroups.com)**

Currently, this group is coordinated by Stefano Prato, whose day job is at the Society for International Development in Rome:  
**[stefanop@sidint.org](mailto:stefanop@sidint.org)**

**KEY SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

**KEY UN CONTACTS**

**CALENDAR**

## Eurodad issue groups

Eurodad is the European CSO network specialising in development finance. Eurodad covers almost all FfD topics, through work areas on ODA, debt, private finance and tax justice.

Each of the work areas is open to all members (and occasionally non-members) and is coordinated by policy and advocacy staff based in Eurodad's Secretariat in Brussels. Each of the areas has a mailing list as main tool for information sharing, holds conference coordination calls, and two strategy meetings per year.

Places where all of Eurodad's streams come together are the Eurodad International Conference every two years, and the UN FfD process. Eurodad and its members have traditionally been one of the most important groups to provide policy expertise and content to the CSO work on FfD, and to conduct advocacy and campaigns towards European governments and beyond.

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