



UfU
Independent Institute for
Environmental Issues



NDC PARTICIPATION GUIDEBOOK

How to ensure ambitious
and just national climate
action through civil society



TABLE OF CONTENTS

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- Preface 3
- Ensuring ambitious and just NDCs through civil society participation 4
- An approach to civil society participation 7
- Unlocking participatory NDC updates 9
 - 1. Secure fundamental requirements and safe spaces 10
 - 2. Adopt coherent and enabling legal frameworks 12
 - 3. Build continuous and supporting governance structures 14
 - 4. Strengthen capacity building 16
 - 5. Implement inclusive and transparent participation processes 19
- Tackling challenges and barriers 26
- Summary 28
- Further resources and tools 30
- References 31

PREFACE

In 2023, the Global Stocktake assessed the collective progress towards the goals of the Paris Agreement. The results showed clearly that we are still not on track to reach these goals and limit global warming to well below 2°C. Therefore, ambitious, just and effective climate action is needed now, more than ever.

The Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), as the centrepiece of the Paris Agreement, are designed as a mechanism to increasingly raise ambition and drive climate action. The five-year cycle of the NDCs provides Parties with the crucial opportunity to ‘ratcheting up’ ambition in order to meet the international climate targets. The run-up to the next submission of NDCs in 2025 is therefore a pivotal phase – as it potentially represents the last opportunity to set the course for 1.5°C development pathways and net zero emissions by around mid-century.

It is clear that joint efforts across all levels and sectors are needed to attain the goals of the Paris Agreement and effectively implement the national climate pledges. Thereby, civil society participation can not only inform the upcoming NDCs and provide important knowledge, but also bring various perspectives to the table, mediate different interests, raise awareness and play an essential role in implementing climate targets on the ground. The forthcoming social and economic transformations will only be possible with the support, commitment and ownership of civil society. Meaningful participation is therefore key to ambitious, just, implementable and effective climate action. Now is the time to create opportunities for participation in NDC processes and thus ensure they are firmly anchored in civil society.

In this NDC Participation Guidebook, you can find a clear and concise approach to participation in climate policies including recommendations and good practices. It offers decision-makers a practical overview of key issues for strengthening civil society participation in the NDC cycles.

This guidebook is part of a transnational project to strengthen civil society in the development and implementation of national climate policies, funded by the International Climate Initiative (IKI) of the German Federal Government. On behalf of IKI and UfU, we would like to thank all the partners involved and express our appreciation for their valuable contributions to the project: BUND (Friends of the Earth Germany) as project lead, as well as Green Alternative in Georgia, Ecoaction in Ukraine and Censat Agua Viva in Colombia as project partners.

We hope you will find the NDC Participation Guidebook a useful resource and a source of inspiration for your work.



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ENSURING AMBITIOUS AND JUST NDCS THROUGH CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION

Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) have been established in the Paris Agreement as a key instrument to drive ambitious climate action. They are designed as a mechanism to increasingly raise ambition worldwide in order to meet the goal of the Paris Agreement to limit global warming to well below 2°C, preferably to 1.5°C. A country's NDC represents its national climate pledge to reduce national emissions, adapt to the impacts of climate change and secure finance for climate action. The mechanism provides for continuous improvement through the submission of an updated NDC every 5 years.

However, assessments of the last NDCs show that global ambition is falling short (UNEP 2022; UNFCCC 2023a; IPCC 2023). The first Global Stocktake in 2023, a review of collective progress towards the goals of the Paris Agreement, also clearly showed that current collective efforts to address the climate crisis are not sufficient, neither in terms of mitigation nor adaption (UNFCCC 2023b).

At the same time, the direct effects of anthropogenic climate change can no longer be overlooked. The climate crisis threatens livelihoods and ecosystems, leads to displacement, lets ecosystems collapse, harms people's health and fuels economic inequalities and poverty. Time is running out, and more ambitious climate action is urgently needed if we are to have any chance of securing a liveable planet for present and future generations (IPCC 2023).

In 2025, Parties will submit updated NDCs which should reflect a country's "highest possible ambition" (UNFCCC 2015, Art. 4) and take into account the latest outcomes of the Global Stocktake. However, to create an ambitious, just and effective response to the climate crisis, strong civil society participation in decision-making, implementation and monitoring of climate action is key. The necessary efforts required to still have a chance of meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement are a complex challenge that societies can only face collectively. In the sense of a 'whole-of-society approach', it requires the knowledge, engagement and cooperation of a wide range of actors across sectors and levels (NDC Partnership 2024). Therefore, strong civil society participation in updating and implementing NDCs is essential to leverage necessary capacities and commitments, strengthen support, and ensure societal wide buy-in and ownership of national climate action.

The specific role of **civil society participation in climate and environmental governance** has long been discussed and researched (Reid et al. 2012; Nasiritousi et al. 2016; Kypuer et al. 2018; BUND 2019; Hsu et al. 2020). We will briefly highlight some key aspects that are important for participation in NDC processes, such as the upcoming NDC update:

Civil society participation informs policies

The insights and knowledge of civil society actors are important for designing ambitious, implementable and just climate action. For instance, local engagement and expertise can ensure that planned measures are compatible with local conditions and needs and can be effectively implemented. Moreover, civil society organisations (CSO) carry out research, the results of which can inform decision-making through participation processes.

Civil society participation fosters inclusion of different interests and needs

Meaningful participation enables civil society to bring interests and perspectives from various groups to the table. Thereby they can express and strengthen the needs of diverse stakeholders and particularly vulnerable groups in the NDC updating process. Conflicting interests that arise can be addressed and mediated in such participation processes.

Civil society participation functions as a driver for more ambition

Through participation processes, civil society actors can push for more ambitious climate action and the fulfilment of (inter-)national climate targets. They can draw attention to the needed increase in ambition in the NDC update, mobilise the wider public and build up pressure.

Civil society participation is a matter of justice

Civil society participation creates opportunities for communities, such as Indigenous Peoples, youth, women, LGBTQIA+ and minority ethnic groups, who are particularly affected by climate change and most vulnerable to its impacts, to make their voices heard. These groups should be at the centre of just responses to the climate crisis. This also includes decisions on the distribution

of the cost and impacts of climate action, which must be fairly shared to prevent a disproportionate burden on the most vulnerable groups. A participatory NDC updating process allows for the inclusion of different perspectives and thus better address issues of justice. Therefore, participation processes must be designed and implemented in an inclusive way, and structural barriers and discrimination must be addressed.

Civil society participation creates ownership and facilitates implementation

Engagement and buy-in from stakeholders on different levels and sectors is required to implement far-reaching actions in order to meet international climate targets. The acceptance and support of such economy and society-wide transformations is key for the effective and sustainable implementation of locally adapted and socially accepted climate action. Strong civil society participation in the process can build trust in the NDC, strengthen its legitimacy and acceptance, and create a sense of ownership in civil society, all of which are crucial for implementation.

Civil society participation holds governments accountable and increases transparency

Through their participation in NDC processes, civil society actors can increase transparency of the ongoing processes and inform the public about the NDC update. They can monitor and communicate progress as well as non-compliance to international climate targets. Therefore, they can act as watchdogs of the NDC mechanism and hold governments accountable.

Moreover, the participation of civil society is also enshrined in international climate governance institutions (e.g. Andonova et al. 2009; Bäckstrand et al. 2017). Public participation and public access to information is embedded in Article 6 of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and in Article 12 of the Paris Agreement. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) emphasises that strengthening equity and the participation of all relevant actors in decision-making across all levels can build social trust, deepen and broaden support for transformative changes and facilitate effective, informed and just policies (IPCC 2023, p. 31f.). “Meaningful and effective social dialogue and participation of all stakeholders” (UNFCCC 2023b, p. 3) is also highlighted in the Global Stocktake as the basis for a just and sustainable response to the climate crisis. Despite this degree of institutionalisation, it is repeatedly criticised that the voice of civil society in central UNFCCC negotiations is very limited and that it is particularly difficult for civil society from regions in the Global South to participate (Steffen & Niranjana 2021; Lakhani 2022). Civil society encounters structural barriers also in the NDC processes at national level. Comprehensive processes that enable meaningful participation are still rare (BUND 2023, 2024; Oxfam 2024).

Brief, civil society participation fulfils an essential role in climate action and is deeply embedded in the architecture of international climate governance. However, the potential of meaningful participation in climate policies has not yet been fully realised. Strengthening participation in the NDC updates is therefore a key step to unlock this potential and ensure ambitious, just and implementable NDCs with strong civil society ownership.

How to use the NDC Participation Guidebook

The *NDC Participation Guidebook* provides a concise overview of participation in national climate policies, identifies key aspects and general recommendations for participatory NDC processes, especially in updating NDCs, and illustrates its findings with practical examples. The guidebook addresses decision-makers in the field of environment and climate issues, as well as civil society actors who engage in, or want to engage in, participation processes. It is based on the results of case studies carried out in Moldova, Argentina, Chile, Georgia, Colombia, Kazakhstan, Costa Rica and Ukraine in 2019 and 2023/24 as well as on recent literature.

The guidebook provides practical examples as illustrations and inspiration for participatory NDC processes. Certainly, the depicted good practices cannot serve as blueprints, as participation always needs to be adapted, taking the specific context and needs into account. Furthermore, the good practices may only refer to a specific positive feature or characteristic and do not necessarily qualify as an example of good practice in their entirety.

AN APPROACH TO CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION

The participation of civil society can significantly improve the formulation of climate policies and lead to more ambitious, sustainable and accepted solutions, but only if the preconditions for meaningful participation are in place and the participation processes are designed adequately. In order for civil society participation to actually have an impact in terms of diversity of perspectives, increased acceptance and legitimacy, exchange of knowledge and information, as well as transparency and accountability, it is important to adhere to certain principles to build and strengthen a civic space for participation.

The Independent Institute for Environmental Issues (UfU e.V.) developed a methodological framework to assess participation processes and their general preconditions. This approach provides a lens that can be used for a structured analysis of civic space for participation (Donges et al 2020a). Based on this framework, the guidebook takes a closer look at key aspects of participation in NDC processes.

The methodological framework consists of five closely interconnected dimensions which make up the civic space for participation: **(1) fundamental requirements, (2) enabling legislation, (3) supporting governance and structures, (4) capacity building, and (5) qualitative participation processes.** These dimensions are represented as five fingers, which, when taken together, create the ‘participation handprint’. Each dimension is further specified by a number of indicators.



The framework is based on scientific literature and publications on civil society participation in climate policy and civil space as well as on a range of case studies conducted in the project in cooperation with researchers from eight different countries. Even though the framework provides a general basis to assess civic space for participation, it is not necessarily applicable in every context. Country-specific characteristics or temporal conditions, can render the framework less suitable.

A number of key concepts are particularly relevant for further discussion of civil society participation and are therefore clarified in this section. In the following section, we explore the five dimensions of the handprint in more detail and outline key aspects of NDC processes with strong civil society participation along the different dimensions.

Key concept “Participation”

In a broad sense, participation consists of actions that people take to influence policies (e.g. Cornwall 2008; Van Deth 2014). It ranges from exercising basic democratic rights, for example in elections, to informal participation formats and protests. Participation can vary greatly in its scope and the potential impact, ranging from information to empowerment (Arnstein 1969). In the guidebook, we focus on participation as interactions between state institutions and citizens and/or representatives of civil society.

Key concept “Civil society”

We refer to civil society as all individuals, networks, movements, groups and organisations that are distinct both from government and business. Civil society is heterogeneous and dynamic. Civil society actors, such as civil society organisations (CSOs), can act on many issues based on shared interests, goals and values. They can vary greatly in their form, activities, strategies and roles. All of this has an impact on how they participate in environmental and climate governance (Nasiritousi et al. 2016; Marquardt et al. 2022). The focus of the guidebook lies on the participation of organised groups (e.g. CSOs). However, it also addresses participation of the general public.

Key concept “Civic space”

Civic space refers to the political, legislative, social and economic environment of civil society. In an open civic space, civil society can participate meaningfully and influence the political and social structures around them. To ensure an open civic space, the three fundamental rights of civil society: freedom of association, peaceful assembly and freedom of expression, must be recognised and promoted. A civic space for participation thus delineates the space within which inclusive, safe, effective and transparent participation can take place. Recent analysis shows that civic space is under pressure and it is becoming increasingly difficult to take a stand against injustice, discrimination and environmental degradation (CIVICUS 2024).

**State of research
on NDC participation**

Since the introduction of the NDC mechanism in 2015, the scientific literature has expanded from technical assessments of climate targets to include procedural aspects such as the development and implementation of NDCs. While research on participation in the UNFCCC processes has mainly focused on the annual Conference of the Parties (COP) (e.g. Bäckstrand et al. 2017; Zhao 2023), civil society participation in NDC processes has received limited attention. As part of this project, we worked with local research teams to analyse national participation processes, including NDCs, in Colombia, Georgia and Ukraine (Donges et al. 2020b). Other research analysing participation in NDC processes has focused, for instance, on how non-state actors can contribute to justice, legitimacy and effectiveness of the Paris Agreement (Kuyper et al. 2018), conducted case studies on participation in NDC processes (Arriagada et al. 2018; Alves et al. 2022), and examined the role and participation of Indigenous Peoples in the NDCs (Shea & Thornton 2019; Carmona et al. 2023). However, more research is needed to further assess civil society participation in NDC processes and identify areas for improvement.

UNLOCKING PARTICIPATORY NDC UPDATES

Ensuring strong civil society participation in the updating of the NDCs is a multifaceted task and encompasses various aspects and levels. Based on the five dimensions of the civic space for participation, the following section outlines key principles for good participation in NDC processes, underlined by practical examples. The figure below provides an overview of this section and the key findings.

**Secure fundamental requirements and safe spaces**

- Stability and peace
- Anti-corruption and transparency
- Security of environmental defenders

**Adopt coherent and enabling legal frameworks**

- Commitment to international conventions like the Aarhus Convention and the Escazú-Agreement
- Provisions in national laws for timely, proactive and effective participation

**Build continuous and supporting governance structures**

- Governance structures and financial resources that support participation
- Institutional cooperation and coordination

**Strengthen capacity building**

- Education and awareness raising on public participation
- Capacity building on participation inside administration, governmental institutions and CSOs

**Implement inclusive and transparent participation processes**

- Timely and broad invitation
- Adequate participation formats
- Early participation with impact on process and result
- Transparent access to information and documentation
- Due account of recommendations by civil society



SECURE FUNDAMENTAL REQUIREMENTS AND SAFE SPACES

Fundamental requirements must be fulfilled to secure a safe civic space for participation: a basis of security and stability, a certain degree of transparency and trust in institutions, protection from harassment and physical threat for active members of civil society, and a certain political will.

Stability and peace

One of the fundamental requirements is stability and peace. The absence of war and violent conflict is essential in order to enable a safe operating space for civil society. The safety and security of all citizens from physical and non-physical threat is a key prerequisite for participation in all forms. Security in the face of environmental changes and natural disasters plays an increasingly important role in ensuring the stability and safety of people and societies worldwide. Therefore, establishing a stable and safe environment is a comprehensive task which must be a country's top priority. Clearly, external contextual factors that are not always within a country's control, play a central role in how stability and peace can be guaranteed. However even in the absence of peace, participation in environmental and climate issues is very valuable. The case study on civic space for participation in times of war conducted in Ukraine shows how, despite major disruptions, restrictions and challenges, certain participation efforts can be pursued and the role civil society participation can play in a green recovery (UfU, EPL, & Ecoaction 2024).

Anti-corruption and transparency

The active fight against corruption and the creation of transparency are central aspects of a civic space. Corruption can take various forms and occur in all sectors. It is defined by Transparency International as the "abuse of entrusted power for private gain" (Transparency International n.d.). Corruption can profoundly undermine trust in institutions, increase social inequality, lead to social and environmental standards being disregarded and greatly weaken democracy. Transparency is a key tool in the fight against corruption. It ensures accountability and free access to information. Increased transparency can build trust in institutions, strengthen acceptance of policies and help to prevent disinformation.

Transparency is essential to ensure informed and inclusive participation in the updating of NDCs. For instance, transparency is needed to enable monitoring and evaluation of the countries' efforts, and to ensure that the implementation of actions is carried out in a socially just way (BUND 2023).

On the international level, transparency contributes to monitor global efforts through reporting and reviewing relevant climate information and data. Transparency builds trust between parties and contributes to setting more ambitious targets. Transparency mechanisms ensure the availability of data e.g. on emissions, policies and adaptation measures. The Enhanced Transparency Framework (ETF) will replace earlier transparency mechanisms by the end of 2024, allowing new analysis and assessments of progress (UNFCCC n.d.).

Security of environmental defenders

Ensuring the security of people who actively engage in civil society and express their opinions and demands, such as environmental and human rights defenders, is key to create a safe civil space. Harassments, attacks and the murder of activists have been on the rise for years. In 2022, at least 177 land and environmental defenders were killed. More than a third of these deaths were from Indigenous communities (Global Witness 2023).

In 2022, Latin America accounted for 88% of the reported killings of land and environment defenders worldwide (Global Witness 2023). This is why the ratification of the Escazú Agreement is of particular importance. The agreement is an international regional treaty on environmental matters in Latin America and the Caribbean. Article 9 of the agreement states that parties have to "guarantee a safe and enabling environment for persons, groups and organisations that promote and defend human rights in environmental matters, so that they are able to act free from threat, restriction and insecurity" (United Nations 2018, Article 9.1). Additionally, all rights of defenders must be recognised, protected and promoted (Article 9.2). Parties must take action to prevent, investigate and punish attacks of defenders (Article 9.3). It is essential to ensure that all citizens, especially representatives of vulnerable groups, can express themselves freely and openly, and raise their concerns without putting themselves or their communities at risk. This includes that every citizen has effective and timely access to judicial and administrative authorities. Implementing laws and ratifying international treaties guaranteeing the security of environmental and human rights defenders are a milestone in improving safe civic spaces for participation.

Political commitment

Decision-makers need to have a clear understanding of the value of civil society participation. To have the chance to fulfil its true potential, participation of civil society needs to be valued as an essential contribution to political processes and must be underpinned by political commitment. Therefore, raising awareness and political will for participation is an important aspect to strengthen participation processes. Mechanisms and forums like the Open Government Partnership, a multilateral initiative to promote open government and strengthen governance, can increase dialogue and cooperation between decision-makers and civil society as well as transparency, accountability and trust.

2 ADOPT COHERENT AND ENABLING LEGAL FRAMEWORKS



The second dimension of civic space for participation describes central aspects of a legal framework that clearly defines participation and regulates key aspects in accordance with international standards.

Commitment to international conventions and agreements

The commitment to international conventions and agreements is an important step towards a legal system that enables and promotes civil society participation in environmental and climate matters. Key milestones include: The **Rio Declaration on Environment and Development** (1992), the **Aarhus Convention** (1998) and the **Escazú Agreement** (2018). Such conventions and agreements legally enshrine participation, and also promote linkages across institutions and sectors, facilitating an architecture of good governance. By ratifying and fully incorporating these agreements into national laws, including the revision of existing legislation, countries can strengthen the civic space for participation and improve the effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy of climate policies.

Pushing for ratification of the Escazú Agreement in ARGENTINA

Argentina was one of the first countries to sign the Escazú Agreement. The following ratification process was lengthy but backed by civil society and a cross-party coalition that recognised the importance of the agreement and pushed for ratification. Finally, Argentina ratified the Agreement which then entered into force in 2021. In 2023, the government drafted a national plan to implement the Agreement, with civil society participating in different formats (La Ruta del Clima n.d.; Ministerio de Ambiente y Desarrollo Sostenible 2023).

National laws requiring the proactive participation of civil society

The legal anchoring of participation in national law is essential for guaranteeing a civic space for participation. This includes legally establishing the proactive participation of civil society in decision-making related to the environment and climate. For instance, proactive participation can be enshrined in the constitution, national framework laws on environment and climate matters, strategic environmental assessment laws and climate-related sectoral laws.

The Framework Law on Climate Change in CHILE

The Framework Law on Climate Change entered into force in Chile in 2022 and promotes proactive participation beyond notification. It states the right to “informed participation in the development, review and updating of climate change management tools [...]” (Article 34), also referring to the NDC. It recognises the importance of access to information and participation, and sets out specific criteria for when participation in environmental and climate matters is required. The law promotes the facilitation of citizen participation “in an open and inclusive manner, with particular attention to vulnerable parts of society and communities, using a multicultural and gender approach” (Article 34). However, it should be noted that a further specification of mechanisms on how to proactively participate is still lacking (UfU & FIMA 2023).

National laws requiring timely participation

An enabling legislative framework should define at which stages of decision-making processes participation is required. Therefore, national law must establish clear guidelines on the timely participation of civil society. There must be sufficient time to carry out participation processes and to consider public comments in the decision. Giving clear information on all procedural steps and indicating a timeline is crucial to facilitate participation.

National laws requiring information regarding the participation process

Additionally, national law should ensure that all information relevant to climate related decision-making processes are available to civil society. The information should be made accessible to the public without the need to submit an official request for information.

National laws requiring the consideration of civil society’s comments

National law should stipulate that the results of civil society participation are duly taken into account in the decision-making process. Clear and transparent consideration of civil society input is key to enabling meaningful participation.

National laws requiring notification of civil society on the decision made along with the reasons and considerations on which the decision is based

National laws should stipulate that once a decision has been made, civil society must be notified of the decision taken. The reasons and considerations for the decision must be clearly stated, whereby it must be specified which public comments were taken into account as well as reasons for dismissing others.



3

BUILD CONTINUOUS AND SUPPORTING GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES



This dimension focuses on creating and strengthening long-term structures that enable, coordinate and promote participation processes.

Governance structure

A governance structure should be in place that clarifies the responsibilities of supporting and coordinating participation processes related to the environment and climate. An entity, institution or mechanism, such as a committee or centre, can be entrusted as the overarching focal point of participation across levels and sectors. The structure should be equipped with sufficient financial and human resources.

State Councillor for Civil Society and Citizen Participation in GERMANY

In Germany, a State Councillor for Civil Society and Citizen Participation was appointed for the first time at sub-national level in 2011 in the state of Baden-Württemberg. The State Councillor is part of the government and their main tasks include strengthening opportunities for participation at all levels and mainstreaming participation in government and administrations. A Service Centre for Citizen Participation was created in 2022, which directly supports authorities and administrations in the implementation of public participation, especially in dialogue-orientated formats. In 2023 and 2024, the State Councillor's Office launched an online participation process to compile and comment on the Climate Action Register, which documents all of the state government's climate actions (Staatsministerium Baden-Württemberg n.d.).

GOOD PRACTICE

Institutional coordination & cooperation

Institutional coordination and cooperation across sectors and governance levels is central to the successful and effective implementation of participation processes. It should contribute to more targeted and effective participation through transparency, communication and coordination. Different governance levels and sectors must be taken into account in order to effectively prevent inconsistencies and contradictions between processes and objectives.

National Climate Change Cabinet in ARGENTINA

In Argentina, the National Climate Change Cabinet (Spanish acronym: GNCC) represents a cross-sectoral and multi-level governance approach. The cabinet consists of representatives of 12 ministries and government secretariats and is chaired by the head of the ministerial cabinet. The National Climate Change Cabinet coordinates the government's climate policy at a high level, facilitates cross-sectoral cooperation and synergies. Civil society participation is institutionalised (although not binding) through extended roundtable discussions and an external advisory board (GIZ 2019b; UfU et al. 2023).

GOOD PRACTICE

Environmental Cells in BENIN

Benin established in 2001 so-called 'Environmental Cells': Focal points for climate change appointed in different ministries that coordinate activities across sectors and levels. They enabled and institutionalised cross-sectoral exchange and coordination. The Environmental Cells played a central role in the participatory processes for the preparation of the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) in Benin (GIZ 2019a).

GOOD PRACTICE

Financial resources

Engaging in civil society and taking part in participation processes in particular requires time and financial resources. Funding opportunities for civil society organisations, are in general scarce. And civil society actors that are less institutionalised, such as regular citizens, social movements or initiatives, often have little or no financial resources for their work. Therefore, financially supporting civil society actors to contribute to decision-making processes can be a crucial aspect to enable participation, e.g. in the form of an allowance, reimbursement of travel costs or financial resources for CSOs and their staff. The authorities and institutions in charge of participation procedures must also have sufficient budget and resources to be able to develop and implement appropriate participation processes. Short-term financial issues should not undermine the implementation of participation processes. Particularly the lack of participation and thus a less informed and consolidated decision-making process can lead to considerable costs, including the subsequent revision of measures, failing policies or significant social, environmental and climate damage.

4

STRENGTHEN CAPACITY BUILDING



Building and strengthening capacities, such as knowledge, skills and financial resources, provides an important basis for inclusive and effective participation processes. Capacity building concerns the wider civil society and specific actors such as CSOs as well as the government and administrations.

Environmental education

Environmental education is an essential part of capacity building. It aims to transmit knowledge and raise awareness on environmental challenges. The goal of environmental education is to empower people to actively engage in environmental and climate issues and make informed decisions regarding climate and environmental problems. Environmental education can take many forms in order to reach different target groups and cover different aspects. In the area of formal education, environmental education content should be integrated into the curriculum of schools and universities. In the area of informal education, opportunities outside the formal education system, such as activities, seminars and lectures organised by CSOs or other actors, should be offered.

School of Sustainability in COLOMBIA

'La Escuela de la Sustentabilidad' (School of Sustainability) is a pedagogical approach implemented by the NGO Censat Agua Viva in Colombia. The format is inspired by popular education, which proposes a non-traditional and non-hierarchical didactic learning process. The main objective is to exchange, share and deepen a collective understanding of the underlying systemic causes of social and environmental injustices. The topics and objectives of each school are adapted to the needs of the groups and the region. However, they usually include learning skills to take action, sharing inspiring stories of solutions and successes, as well as creative, artistic, spiritual and musical expressions.

GOOD
PRACTICE

Public awareness raising on participation rights and opportunities

Raising awareness of participation rights and opportunities is key to ensure an active and inclusive civil society. This knowledge is important to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes, regardless of, for example, gender, financial resources or education. Engaging and thorough information campaigns can be carried out online and using traditional media formats to raise public awareness. The use of different communication channels, such as newspapers and social media, allows information about participation opportunities to be widely disseminated and to reach out to civil society.

Environmental Information and Education Centre in GEORGIA

In Georgia, the Environmental Information and Education Centre (EIEC) is a comprehensive website with a mandate to increase access to justice, facilitate public participation in decision-making processes, promote environmental education and raise public awareness. It was established in 2013 by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia. The EIEC thus serves as a key platform for knowledge about participation rights in environmental issues in Georgia and provides a variety of resources, including reports, summaries and explanatory videos. Users can also request public information directly via the website. It is important to ensure that such information platforms are kept updated and maintained (UfU & REC Caucasus 2023).

GOOD
PRACTICE

CSO capacity building on climate change, climate policy, policy dialogue, organisational development, cooperation and networking

Capacity building on the part of CSOs is crucial for inclusive and informed civil society participation in NDC processes. This includes building and strengthening knowledge, skills and resources of CSOs. Capacity building measures range from training and knowledge building on topics such as climate change, climate policies and policy dialogue to organisational development, the improvement of organisational structures and the strengthening of networks and cooperation. There should be special opportunities for small and local initiatives to strengthen their capacities. They can also particularly benefit from knowledge transfer and cooperation with larger CSOs, e.g. when it comes to applying for funding and administrative capacities. Special attention should be paid to vulnerable groups when planning and implementing capacity building measures, and the formats should always be aligned with the specific needs of the target groups.



Climate Dialogues in the EECCA REGION

The Climate Dialogues are an exchange and capacity building format which regularly bring together climate experts and activists from the Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA) region. The format focuses on strengthening civil society participation in climate issues. The Climate Dialogues programme changes every year and includes, for instance, workshops on climate policy, advocacy and media campaigning. The Climate Dialogues are organised by CAN EECCA in cooperation with different partner organisations like Friends of the Earth Germany (BUND) (Climate Action Network 2024).



Youth-centred capacity building in PANAMA

In Panama, a specific youth-focused capacity building programme of the Ministry of Environment is raising awareness on climate change and transferring knowledge and skills to engage in climate action since 2018. In the "Climate Change Academy for Young Leaders," young people between 18 and 35 years are trained on climate related topics and decision-making processes such as the NDCs. An alumni initiative provides continuous support for further activities of participants (Ministerio de Ambiente n.d.).

Capacity building on participation and stakeholder engagement for governments

Capacity building on the part of governments on participation and stakeholder engagement is essential for meaningful participation processes. Knowledge about the role and potential of civil society participation in drafting and implementing just and ambitious NDCs is key. Clarity and streamlined positions on participation in NDC processes among government members and public officials at all levels avoid ambiguity. A lack of capacities may be due to limited budgets, frequent staff fluctuation, or insufficient and indeterminable human resources. These challenges must be addressed. Capacity building activities can include training and awareness raising on existing formal and informal participation mechanisms as well as training and exchange on how to implement participation procedures.

5 IMPLEMENT INCLUSIVE AND TRANSPARENT PARTICIPATION PROCESSES



In addition to the underlying features discussed in the previous sections, the specific design of the participation processes is a core factor for meaningful participation. Regardless of the specific format of participation, central standards of good participation need to be upheld in order to give civil society the opportunity to participate adequately.

Early participation

Enabling civil society to participate at an early stage of the decision-making process is important in order to facilitate the effective integration of expertise and contributions. If participation takes place at a late stage and important preliminary decisions have already been made, the results of participation cannot be fully taken into account. This can affect the quality of the decision and also lead to great frustration on the part of those involved. However, a common dilemma is that the earlier participation takes place in a decision-making process, the more abstract the topic or the subject of the decision. It is therefore essential that the relevance of the subject, such as the NDC update, is communicated at an early stage and in a way that is easy to understand. Broad civil society should be given the opportunity to understand the extent to which they will potentially be affected by the NDC.

Early participation in CHILE

The adoption of the Framework Law on Climate Change in Chile included a comprehensive participation process in 2018 and 2019. Citizen dialogues for the elaboration of the preliminary draft of the law were carried out at an early stage, prior to the publication of the official draft. Face-to-face workshops were organised, consisting of a presentation and a participation phase, in cooperation with the regional governments. The participation phase included moderated and recorded group discussions. The notes of the workshops are accessible online. However, it is not clear to what extent the results of the discussions were incorporated into the revision of the draft (UfU & FIMA 2023).



Broad, inclusive invitation

As the NDC updating process is related to many different sectors and levels, a broad spectrum of different representatives of civil society should be invited to take part in the participation processes. This includes organised civil society, such as CSOs, as well as the general public. Because climate action is a cross-cutting and society-wide issue, it is important to not only include environmental-focused actors, but also other civil society actors. Stakeholder mapping can serve as a tool to provide a systematic overview of existing actors, networks, competences and knowledge.

The participation of underrepresented and vulnerable groups should be facilitated. Therefore, a broad invitation needs to include key stakeholders such as youth, gender, Indigenous Peoples and minority ethnic groups. To ensure that climate action meet the needs of those most affected by the climate crisis, these stakeholders must play a central role in climate policy-making and their participation must be particularly emphasized. Especially Indigenous Peoples, which are often highly impacted by climate change and climate policy measures, play a key role in climate action. Their rights need to be respected, protected and fulfilled and taken into account in the context of NDCs (IWGIA 2022). Oxfam took a closer look at the inclusiveness of NDC processes in eleven countries, stating that especially communities and community-based organisations, women's rights organisations and representatives of Indigenous Peoples were often absent (Oxfam 2024).

Additionally, a broad range of organisation types should be invited to bring different perspectives and knowledge to the table. These include large, national CSOs with advanced technological expertise, as well as smaller grassroots organisations with a deeper understanding of local knowledge. Local expertise plays a central role in climate action and cannot be replaced by (international) expert organisations, academia or consultants.

An inclusive invitation refers not only to the inclusion of different stakeholders, but also to the design of the invitation itself. It should be understandable and accessible. The invitation should be translated into all local native languages and have a clear and easy to understand wording. Where technical terms and abbreviations are used, they must be explained. Moreover, the invitation should also be inclusive in terms of prior knowledge and awareness on the topic. For example, to ensure youth participation, the invitation itself could be co-designed by young stakeholder groups and disseminated through their networks and channels (Kaim 2023).

Reaching out to vulnerable communities in COSTA RICA

Costa Rica's updated NDC from 2020 mentions that in the revision process the Directorate for Climate Change aimed to strengthen the public consultation process through reaching out to communities which are especially vulnerable to climate change and which had less representation in decision-making processes. A series of conversations with groups and communities of women, youth, transgender, Afro-descendants, Indigenous Peoples, people with disabilities and elderly people was carried out to gain feedback and comments on the NDC (MINAE et al. 2020).

**Timely invitation**

Early invitation of stakeholders is essential to ensure that civil society actors have enough time to plan and prepare their participation. An early invitation, ideally with more than a month's prior notice, not only makes logistical organisation easier for the participants but also significantly increases the quality of the participation and therefore the results.

Adequate participation formats

The design of adequate participation formats which correspond to the needs and capacities of the stakeholders involved creates the basis for meaningful participation in updating the NDCs. An adequate format depends on aspects like the scope of participation, the groups targeted and their skills and knowledge. However, creating transparency and clarity about the prevailing conditions, process, roles and responsibilities applies to all formats. In particular, the aim and scope of participation needs to be clarified. In any format, all stakeholders must understand how they can participate and how decisions are made. Moreover, it is important that updated information about the process, steps and timetables is always provided.

The specific form that participation processes take can vary and combine different approaches. Thus, digital and analogue formats can be combined. Formats that reach a broader audience, like online platforms or surveys, can complement smaller and more dialogue-orientated formats such as round-table discussions. The use of different methods makes participation more interesting and varied and thus can increase motivation and commitment to participate. Dialogue-orientated formats can be more complex to implement, but offer a great opportunity for inclusive and effective participation. They facilitate substantiated input from civil society, prevent misunderstandings, promote cooperation and can increase mutual understanding, acceptance as well as a strengthened sense of ownership. Leaving enough time and space for contributions, discussions and questions is essential in such formats. Professional and unbiased moderation is key to create good framework conditions for discussions.

In general, attention must always be paid to eliminating participation barriers. Whether these are language barriers, physical barriers, digital barriers or many other kinds of obstacles that make it difficult or impossible for people to participate. Formats should always guarantee a safe and respectful environment that responds sensitively to participants' needs, paying particular attention to marginalised and discriminated groups. The physical and geographical accessibility must be taken into account to guarantee that participants can attend safely. Organising formats in multiple locations, geographically spread across the country including in rural areas is key to facilitate participation of various groups. Translations into other nationally spoken languages or also sign language can be crucial to involve communities. A mix of methods, e.g. analogue and digital formats, or synchronous (all participants take part at the same time) and asynchronous participation (participants are flexible in terms of time), can also reduce barriers.

Involving civil society through multiple formats in FRANCE

In 2019, after the protests of the 'yellow vests' ('gilets jaunes'), the French government organised the grand national debate ('Grand Débat National') which included a broad range of different participation formats. One of four topics of the debate was the ecological transition of France including climate policies. Civil society could contribute via local assemblies, an online survey, public consultation booths, national conferences with delegates from civil society and decision-makers, and regional conferences with citizens selected by drawing lots. According to the organisers, almost 2 million submissions were received online and over 10,000 local meetings were organised. (Le grand débat national n.d.) Although the participation formats were very varied and on a large scale, there was significant criticism from civil society, including a lack of transparency and insufficient implementation of recommendations.

Transparency and information

Transparency is a central cornerstone for the effective and just participation of civil society. It is essential for the public to get access to all relevant information and data that is needed to fully understand the decision-making process. In order to contribute in an effective, informed and meaningful way, it is vital to provide free and easy access to information. It is important that documents are provided in the local native languages. Information written in citizen-friendly language and easily accessible information formats, particularly concerning quantitative data, strengthen participation effectively. The dissemination of information should be conducted in a coherent, functional and efficient way. Moreover, public officials may need training to handle information requests. Furthermore, all relevant steps of the participation processes should be made transparent to increase traceability of the process. This includes, for instance, information on the formats, objectives, timetables and contact persons.

Available documentation

All relevant steps of the NDC update should be documented to ensure transparency and traceability. This includes providing comprehensible information about the topics, formats, discussions and results of the participation process. It gives orientation and enables civil society to better engage in the process, which can improve the quality of participation. Documentation can also provide the basis for evaluation of the processes and can be made available, for instance through online platforms that provide information on environmental participation.

Comprehensive documentation of the national climate citizens' assembly in IRELAND

The Irish Citizens' Assembly on Climate was one of five citizens' assemblies established in Ireland in 2016. The broader public could participate in the assembly discussion by handing in proposals and recommendations, which were then considered for further deliberation. The discussions and results of the assembly were available online in different formats. This included a YouTube channel with livestreams from the assemblies with Q&A sessions and presentations. Moreover, all speeches and presentations from experts were summarised in writing and made accessible online. The submissions of civil society were also published on the website (Citizens' Assembly 2018).

Transparent review of recommendations

The transparent review of civil society contributions and recommendations is a cornerstone of the participation process. For meaningful participation in the NDC update, a fair and open review process is key to enhancing accountability, building credibility and trust, and strengthening broad ownership of the NDC. Through a transparent system, civil society comments should be evaluated. Stakeholders who have provided input should receive feedback on whether and how their recommendations have been taken into account in the NDC. A transparent review process prevents superficial participation, which can lead to frustration and rejection. Improving the visibility of the inclusion of participation in decision-making is therefore key to strengthen interest in participation. This goes beyond stating whether a contribution has been taken into account but also includes in which way it has impacted the outcome.





Systematic review of civil society contributions in ARGENTINA

The development of the 'Plan Nacional para la Implementación del Acuerdo de Escazú' (National Plan for the Implementation of the Escazú Agreement) in Argentina included a structured review process. Civil society contributions were systematised and grouped along the four main axes of the Escazú Agreement and two further cross-cutting axes (capacity building and governance system). Based on the contributions, a set of guidelines was defined for each axis. For each guideline, targets and indicators were developed to increase transparency and facilitate monitoring. The proposed actions for each guideline were prioritised according to the frequency with which they were mentioned in the participation formats and assessed for feasibility by the relevant authorities according to three feasibility criteria. Actions that did not meet these criteria and were not included in the plan were documented separately and made publicly available for consideration at a later stage (Ministerio de Ambiente y Desarrollo Sostenible 2023).

Evaluation and feedback process

The participation process in updating the NDCs should be evaluated on a regular basis, not only after finalisation. A proper evaluation and feedback mechanism helps to create a responsive and effective process that is better able to respond to challenges and learn from experience. Therefore, obtaining feedback from stakeholders involved enables the process to be improved, formats to be adapted and flaws to be tackled as they arise. There should be an option to submit feedback easily and anonymously.

Steps of participatory NDC processes

Early participation

Participation at an early stage is crucial to ensure that civil society can effectively and meaningfully influence the decision-making process.

Broad and inclusive invitation

A broad spectrum of civil society actors should be invited, taking particular account of local communities and vulnerable groups.

Timely invitation

A timely invitation is needed to ensure that civil society actors have enough time to plan and prepare their participation.

Adequate participation formats

Adequate and diverse formats should involve civil society in a meaningful way. Dialogue-oriented and interactive formats as well as fair, equal and binding participation are key.

Transparency and information

Transparency of the process is crucial. Easy and free access to all relevant information should also be guaranteed and translation of documents provided where necessary.

Available documentation

Documentation of all relevant steps and results of the process should be made available to civil society.

Transparent review of recommendations

Transparency in the review of civil society contributions is essential.

Evaluation and feedback process

Evaluation of the participation process and the opportunity to provide feedback is to be ensured.

Just and ambitious NDC

Planning

Communication

Implementation

Review

Result

TACKLING CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Despite all efforts, obstacles and pitfalls can arise during the planning and implementation of participation processes for updating NDCs. Some constraints and possible solutions have already been discussed in the previous section. We will now take a look at overarching frequent challenges and ways to address them.

Being responsive to local and national challenges

Participation must always be embedded in the respective context. An important point is therefore that barriers to participation are identified and addressed in this context. These could relate to gender, language, culture, financial resources, conflicts, etc. Reducing and ultimately overcoming these barriers is key to meaningful participation.

Building trust through meaningful participation

In order for civil society to participate and contribute to the process, trust must be established. Enabling participation and thus recognising the value of participation is key. A lack of transparency, missing information and short deadlines, for instance, make participation significantly more difficult and convey a lack of appreciation for civil society's contribution.

Another aspect that undermines the participation of civil society and can lead to great frustration and disengagement is ineffective participation and tokenism. If the time of participation is chosen too late and important decisions have already been made or if the review of recommendation process is not transparent and comprehensible, this can lead to delegitimisation and rejection of the process and its outcomes. This lack of meaningful participation and transparency can also result in a loss of trust in the government institutions in general.

It should also be noted that participation in climate targets, such as the NDCs, only develops its effect and potential when these targets are implemented. The implementation gap between climate action goals and measures taken undermines the effect of participation and climate policy decisions.

Facilitate dialogue and enhance mutual understanding

Participation processes for the development and elaboration of climate policies often lack in-depth discussion and exchange formats for stakeholders. Many formats remain in the realm of consultation. More comprehensive participation which enables dialogue can significantly increase the chance of mutual understanding and cooperation. The opportunity to better understand other positions also makes it easier to allow for concessions and compromises.

Addressing lack of interest in participation

Even if the participation process is well planned and implemented, it may not attract much interest from civil society. This may be partly because the subject of NDCs and national climate policies seems both abstract and very technical to many civil society groups. Or other issues are considered more pressing at that moment. It is important that participation processes emphasise the importance of the issue and the direct consequences of a lack of climate policy. Environmental education, awareness-raising and knowledge transfer also play a key role in building interest and capacity to participate.

Previous poor experiences with participation processes in particular can impact the level of civil society engagement. It is therefore important to take these past experiences into account. Transparency regarding the process and the scope of participation, as well as transparent and easily accessible information, are often important to rebuild trust and interest in participation processes.

Enhancing financial resources for participation

In order to enable sufficient financing of participation processes, participation must always be included in planning and cost calculations. Prior to the NDC update processes, the costs of the envisaged participation formats should be calculated and a budget made available. The prioritisation of expenditure certainly plays an important role in the allocation of a sufficient budget. External funding programmes for climate financing can also provide more financial resources for such processes (NDC Partnership n.d.).

SUMMARY

The update of the NDCs in 2025 is a crucial opportunity to build momentum and leverage the collective efforts needed to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement and limit global warming to well below 2°C. Meaningful participation of civil society is key for ambitious and just NDCs and their effective implementation. Ensuring the strong participation of civil society in the upcoming NDC update is therefore essential.

It is a complex and multi-dimensional task to build and strengthen a civic space in which civil society participation can thrive. The NDC Participation Guidebook provides a structured overview of participation in national climate policy, identifies key aspects and general recommendations for participatory NDCs and underpins its findings with practical examples. It addresses decision-makers in the field of environment and climate, as well as civil society actors interested in participating in environmental and climate governance.

In the guidebook, five core elements to build and strengthen a safe civic space for civil society participation and ensure participatory NDC processes are outlined:

Secure fundamental requirements



Fundamental requirements should be secured to lay the foundations for meaningful participation. This includes stability and peace, transparency and trust in institutions, political will for participation and protection from harassment and physical threats to environmental defenders and active members of society.

Adopt coherent and enabling legal frameworks



In general, meaningful and continuous civil society participation should be underpinned by coherent and enabling legislation including national laws as well as international agreements. This legal framework should guarantee for instance the right to information, participation and access to justice.

Build continuous and supporting governance structures



Creating and strengthening long-term governance structures across sectors and levels that enable, coordinate and promote participation processes contribute to effective and efficient participation processes. Clear responsibilities and inter-institutional coordination help to avoid inconsistencies and misunderstandings and to strengthen synergies.

Strengthen enabling capacity building



Building and strengthening capacities both within administrations and civil society organisations is a key factor to enable and enhance participation. For instance, capacity building can include knowledge, practical skills and financial resources. To address a broader audience, environmental education and raising awareness on participation rights are two important elements of building capacities in civil society.

Implement inclusive and transparent participation processes



In the specific design and implementation of participation regarding NDC processes, key factors for meaningful participation are broad and inclusive invitations of stakeholders, early participation and timely provision of accessible information, participation formats that correspond to the needs and capacities of the stakeholders and a transparent review process of contributions from civil society.

It should be noted that all participation efforts need to be adapted to the specific context and take the prevailing conditions into account. The NDC Participation Guidebook can serve as a source of information, recommendations and inspiration to ensure just and ambitious NDCs with strong civil society participation.

FURTHER RESOURCES AND TOOLS

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NOTES

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Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) were established in the Paris Agreement as a key instrument to drive ambitious climate action. They were designed as a mechanism to progressively raise global ambition to meet the goal of limiting global warming to well below 2°C, preferably to 1.5°C. However, global ambition is still insufficient. In 2025, Parties will submit updated NDCs which should reflect a country's "highest possible ambition" (Paris Agreement, Art. 4).

To create an ambitious, just and effective response to the climate crisis, strong civil society participation in the updating and implementation of NDCs is key. Meaningful participation can leverage necessary capacities and commitments in society and ensure broad societal support as well as ownership of national climate action.

The NDC Participation Guidebook provides a practical overview of essential issues for strengthening civil society participation in the NDC cycles.

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