

Moving together for UHC: listening to civil society on how to strengthen social participation in policy and decision-making

A recent consultation with civil society organizations (CSOs) has reinforced the importance of practical and flexible guidance for meaningful social participation, communicating the benefits of social participation to decision-makers, and widening access of marginalized groups to national policy and decision-making processes.

Social participation mechanisms are vital for responsive health reforms that leave no one behind in efforts to achieve universal health coverage (UHC).

This is why WHO is developing, with contributions from civil society organisations and UHC2030, a social participation handbook to provide best practice guidance.

In the spirit of participation, it is important to get feedback from CSOs on contents of the handbook. So UHC2030 and WHO held a consultation to find out more. In December 2019, UHC2030 and its Civil Society Engagement Mechanism (CSEM), WHO and the UHC Partnership launched the consultation for civil society actors to provide feedback on the contents of the [‘Handbook on Social Participation for UHC’](#). The handbook aims to provide best practice guidance to policymakers on how to effectively and meaningfully engage with populations, civil society, and communities for policy- and decision-making.

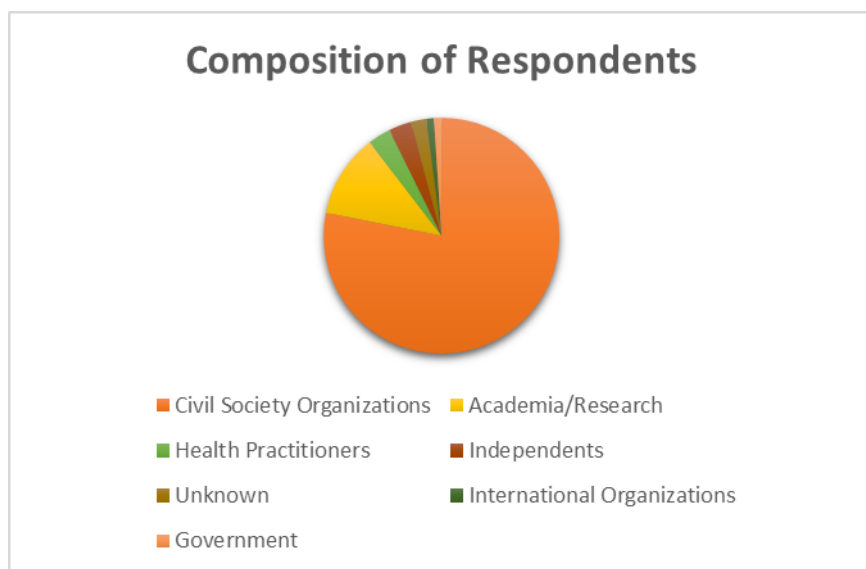


Who did we hear from?

Over a period of three months, about 100 respondents from across the globe provided their input on the core social participation topics covered by the handbook. These are representation in participatory processes; capacity-building for participation; linking participatory processes to decision-making; legal frameworks for participation; and sustaining participatory processes over time.

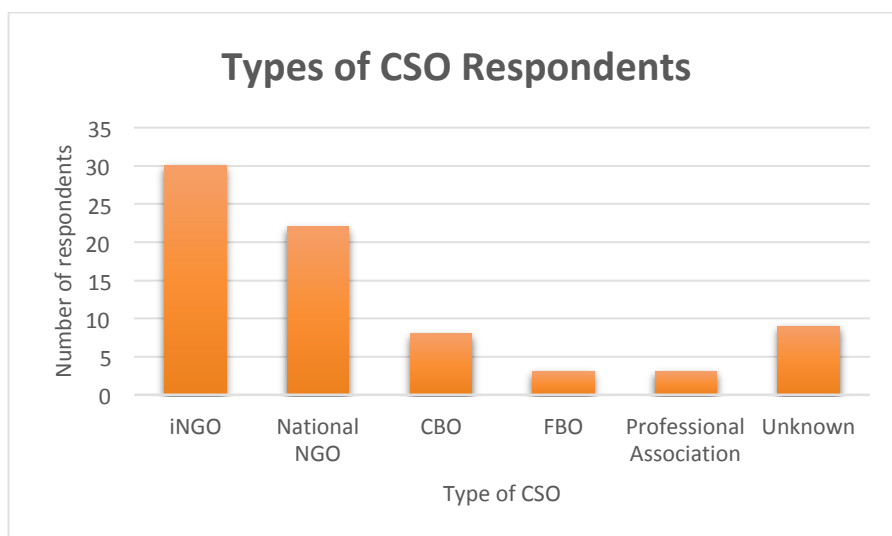
The majority of respondents were from CSOs however, actors in academia, government, international organizations and health practitioners also responded (Graph 1).

Graph 1



Civil society perspectives from the international to community level were captured through the survey, but to varying degrees (Graph 2). The majority of civil society respondents worked at the international level, a significant amount of civil society respondents operated at the national level and a few worked at the grassroots, community-level.

Graph 2



CSO (Civil society organization)

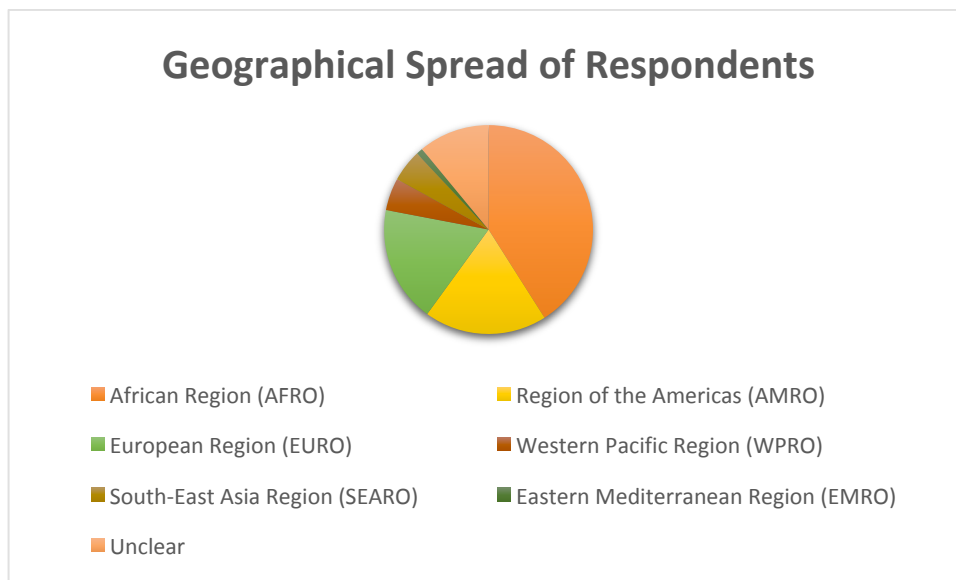
iNGO (International Non-governmental Organization)

CBO (Community-based organization)

FBO (Faith-based organization)

Overall, there was representation across all WHO regions, with the most responses coming from the African Region (AFRO) and the Region of the Americas (AMRO) (Graph 3)

Graph 3



What did they tell us?

Overall, the global consultation confirmed that the concepts and positioning of the handbook fill a void in existing social participation guidance. Respondents emphasized the need for **practical guidance on how to conduct meaningful social participation between governments and civil society actors**.

Through extensive research and case studies, the handbook will highlight country-level challenges and lessons learned for social participation and ‘translate’ them into guidance for policy-makers on how to engage meaningfully with populations, communities, and civil society.

The responses to the consultation reiterated that there is **no one-size-fits-all approach** when it comes to social participation. The handbook will thus not be prescriptive but will pinpoint the key issues which policy-makers must adequately reflect on and adapt to local context.

The consultation echoed that **the benefits of social participation are still not recognized by many government cadres**. This is one of the main reasons why Member State governments are the key target audience for the guidance book. This feedback is critical and emphasizes the great need for a strong case to be made for governments to lead and institutionalize social participation mechanisms for the benefit of society.

The realities and challenges of social participation were laid bare by respondents, specifically the social, political, and economic barriers that marginalized populations face in engaging in national policy-making processes. The respondents urged handbook authors to clarify how marginalized populations could more frequently and more effectively be included in national policy-making spaces. As such, **the handbook will put emphasis on asking “Who is not at the table?”. Recognition that additional efforts are needed to reach marginalized groups was firmly welcomed.**

Next steps

Overall, the process reiterated the need for practical guidance for meaningful social participation and ensuring the most marginalized have access to national policy and decision-making processes. The consultation confirmed that the ideas in the handbook resonated with non-governmental actors, and orients the content by providing insights into prominent community health concerns. The process also proved to be an excellent tool for people and organizations to contribute specific examples on how to address social participation challenges and provide ideas for handbook follow-up initiatives. It has reiterated the need for input from the field from those who witness these challenges first-hand.

A conference copy of the core technical handbook chapters will be released in the soon, with a final version available in late 2020.