

Advancing Social Participation for Universal Health Coverage **Building support for a resolution at the 77th World Health Assembly (WHA)**

(Long version)

This advocacy brief has been developed to support civil society actions towards building support for a World Health Assembly (WHA) [resolution on Social participation for universal health coverage, health and well-being](#). The brief provides background information on the process, summarises key advocacy asks, and identifies milestones and practical actions for civil society and communities in the lead up to the 77th WHA (WHA77) taking place between 27 May - 1 June 2024 in Geneva, Switzerland.

Making the case for social participation and a WHA resolution in 2024

Defining social participation for UHC

Social participation relates to the empowerment of people, communities, and civil society to participate in - and thereby influence - decision-making processes for health. It is the cornerstone of equitable, inclusive, transparent, and responsive health systems that leave no one behind. This inclusive approach not only promotes healthier behaviours and practices but also fosters community resilience, reduces health inequalities, and builds trust in healthcare systems. Moreover, it enhances the sustainability and effectiveness of health initiatives by leveraging collective knowledge, fostering ownership, and creating stronger social support networks. Yet, in many parts of the world today, the avenues for social participation are diminishing and widening disparities as some governments increasingly target civil society and certain communities experiencing marginalisation, including but not limited to Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities; people on the move (migrants, stateless and displaced persons); people with disabilities; people living with a rare disease, people who are neurodivergent; people living with HIV; people with minoritised sexual orientations; gender-diverse people; people engaged in sex work; people who are or have been criminalised or incarcerated; people living in poverty; and people living amid humanitarian, climate, and conflict crises.

A global movement for social participation

Since the launch of ["Voice, agency, empowerment - handbook on social participation for universal health coverage"](#) in 2021, there has been a noticeable increase in political commitment among Member States to promote social participation in health decision-making. This commitment extends to regional levels, seen in references to social participation in [WHO Regional Committee Meetings](#) and resolutions, and through initiatives like the European [Youth4Health Network](#) established by WHO Europe. There have been parallel efforts to improve the engagement of civil society and youth in the workings of WHO through the WHO Youth Council and the [Civil Society Commission](#).

In 2021, during a [dialogue on social participation and accountability](#), Dr. Tedros emphasised:

“As we build forward better and prepare for future emergencies, we need to empower community ownership, enhance participatory governance, rebuild trust in public health, and strengthen global solidarity. This is true not only for emergencies but in every area of health, and especially in making progress towards universal health coverage.”

Two years on, at the [76th WHA side event](#) in May 2023, several Member States announced their intention to pursue a resolution on institutionalising social participation at the WHA in 2024. A series of multi-stakeholder consultations were held to inform a [Technical Paper](#), which summarises priority actions for Member States as they seek to institutionalise social participation for health.

At the United Nations High-level Meeting on UHC in September 2023, world leaders renewed their commitment to accelerate progress towards achieving UHC and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. In [the Political Declaration](#), world leaders committed to advancing social participation *“involving all relevant stakeholders, including local communities, health workers and care workers in the health sector, volunteers, civil society organisations and youth in the design, implementation and review of universal health coverage, to systematically inform decisions that affect public health, so that policies, programmes and plans better respond to individual and community health needs, while fostering trust in health systems.”*

Taking collective action on the road toward the WHA77

The upcoming WHA in May is a critical moment for ensuring that Member States reaffirm their commitment to advancing social participation and UHC. If the resolution is endorsed, it will specify priority actions for advancing social participation and act as a catalyst for political support at the national level. This includes creating opportunities for civil society and other actors to hold governments accountable and offering clear direction to Member States for effectively implementing their commitments. To ensure the resolution is successfully adopted at the 77th WHA, civil society has an important role to play in building the political support needed to ensure that social participation for health - and the actions required to promote meaningful participation - are prioritised by decision makers at all levels.

Opportunity to engage

Ahead of the WHA, the governments of Thailand and Slovenia—co-sponsored by Brazil, Colombia, Croatia, Ecuador, Finland, France, Guatemala, Norway, Qatar, Slovakia, Sri Lanka, Tunisia and the United States of America—are pursuing [the resolution on social participation for health](#). In the zero draft resolution text, these governments drew upon [the WHO Handbook on Social Participation](#), urging Member States to *“strengthen, institutionalise and sustain meaningful social participation in all health-related decisions through:*

- *Strengthening government capacities for the design and implementation of meaningful social participation;*
- *Ensuring equitable, diverse and inclusive participation;*
- *Ensuring that social participation has the authority to inform decision-making for health across the policy cycle, at all levels of the system;*
- *Implementing and sustaining a range of regular social participation mechanisms, including through supportive legal frameworks;*
- *Investing adequate, sustainable and predictable financial resources in support of social participation;*
- *Facilitating the capacity strengthening and financial resources for civil society for diverse, equitable and inclusive social participation;*
- *Monitoring, evaluating, and reviewing the quality and impact of social participation and supporting related research.”*

Thailand and Slovenia have since convened Member States to negotiate the resolution text, and build momentum around the resolution. Further, civil society dialogues (termed “informals”) have been held to provide a platform for civil society to share their perspectives on the zero draft/outstanding issues from the negotiations.

Currently, there is a critical window to finalise the text of the resolution and secure broad co-sponsorship in advance of the WHA. By working together to advocate to the relevant decision-makers, we can increase the chances of this resolution being approved, with our key tasks included.

Civil society priorities for a WHA resolution on institutionalising social participation for health

The following are key actions for Member States to move towards institutionalising social participation.

These priorities draw from [the WHO Technical Paper](#), and have been adapted based on a civil society consultation led by the [Social Participation for Health Engagement Research and Empowerment](#) (SPHERE) consortium and including [the CSEM for UHC2030](#).

- Establish and strengthen spaces for sustained regular participation of all, including through necessary legal and institutional arrangements, and simultaneously listen effectively to community perspectives amplified through grassroots mobilisation (i.e., outside ‘invited’ spaces).
- Invest adequate, stable and predictable financial resources to support social participation, with a particular emphasis on marginalised and vulnerable groups
- Build government capacities to design and implement meaningful participation, and facilitate the capacity strengthening of populations, communities, and civil society, which may involve legal reforms to empower civil society and communities.

- Monitor and use data routinely to evaluate the quality of participatory process and the impact on decisions made, while supporting related research.
- Ensure the voices of groups facing disadvantage are effectively heard through diverse, equitable and inclusive participation.

Mobilizing political support for a WHA Resolution at national and global levels

At national level

- Use resources, for instance [this directory of Permanent Missions to the UN at Geneva](#), to identify the relevant focal points for your country who can support implementation of the Resolution:
 - Within the Ministry of Health (at capital level), including delegations attending the WHA in May 2024. Near to the WHA, the WHO typically publishes a list of delegates, and it is worth exploring in country MoH structures.
 - Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including the delegations attending the WHA, as well as the focal points for health within the country's missions in Geneva.
- Lobby the various key actors to convey key messages and ensure they will be included in the country positions for the WHA:
 - Key forthcoming processes include:
 - Co-signing the draft resolution on social participation and endorsing it at WHA 77.
 - Building awareness and support for your country to champion social participation/community engagement in all international agreements being negotiated, and across all levels of the system.
 - Ensuring commitments within the resolution on social participation for universal health coverage, health and well-being are implemented at the national level beyond WHA.
- Activities for civil society include:
 - Send a letter and/or organize a multi-stakeholder dialogue with key focal points, urging them to commit to:
 - Showing leadership and support for implementing, strengthening and sustaining meaningful social participation in health-related decisions.
 - Co-sign the draft resolution on social participation and endorse it at the WHA 77.
 - Attend a high-level ministerial side event on the resolution on social participation on Tuesday 28th May, led by Norway, Slovenia, Thailand, CSEM, European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, UHC2030, UHC Partnership.
 - In the months following WHA, convene a debriefing dialogue with civil society and /community representatives to discuss the status of social participation in their country, the priority actions for implementation listed

in the draft resolution, and what specific actions the government will take to advance implementation of the resolution in the short-medium and longer term.

You can use the [advocacy template letter](#) to ask your government official, such as your Minister of Health to convey the main asks to support the resolution mentioned above.

At global level

Mobilise international networks/coalitions to support this advocacy and convey messaging on social participation for universal health coverage, health, and well-being:

- Encourage members of the WHO Civil Society Commission to champion this agenda in the lead-up to and during the WHA.
- Send a letter urging the WHO Director General (DG) to champion social participation, including in his opening remarks during the WHA77.
- Disseminate the [open letter addressed to Ministers of Health](#), signed by the co-chairs of UHC 2030.
- Participate in social media campaigns on X and LinkedIn before and during the WHA.
 - o Follow [@georgeinstitute](#) [@CSOs4UHC](#) [@UHC2030](#) on X for more information, and tag them in your posts.
 - o Use the hashtags #SocialParticipation #SPHERETogether #HealthforAll #MyHealth #MyRight
- Highlight the importance of social participation in constituency statements being prepared for delivery at the WHA77.

Reference materials

- [Voice, agency, empowerment - handbook on social participation for universal health coverage](#) (WHO Handbook - 2021) - This handbook is a practical guide that draws on best practices and lessons learned to support government institutions in setting up, fine-tuning, improving, and institutionalising new or existing participatory health governance mechanisms.
- [Social participation for universal health coverage: Technical paper](#) - This technical paper distils key messages from the Handbook, along with feedback from a multi stakeholder consultation process to identify recommended priority actions for Member States to institutionalise social participation in decision-making processes for health.
- [The 2023 UN Political Declaration on UHC](#) – A high-level statement outlining the commitments and priorities of Member States toward achieving UHC and was adopted at the UN HLM on UHC in September 2023.
- [SPHERE, Social Participation for Health, Engagement, Research and Empowerment](#) - A partnership between civil society, academic and health organisations, including WHO, documenting, reflecting on, and drawing lessons from past and existing participatory spaces to identify how community members, particularly people at the margins, can be better involved, and how power can be meaningfully claimed by community members.

The project is being implemented with collaborators in Kenya, Vietnam, and Argentina, with a fourth focus country to be added soon.

- [Are we listening? Acting on commitments to social participation for universal health coverage](#) - This commentary, prepared by members of SPHERE, emphasises the pivotal roles of civil society and communities in advancing UHC, alongside key actions Member States can take to promote meaningful, inclusive social participation.