

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

This advocacy brief has been developed to support civil society actions towards building support for a World Health Assembly (WHA) resolution for institutionalizing social participation to accelerate progress towards Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. The brief provides background information on the process, summarizes key advocacy asks, and identifies milestones and suggested actions for civil society and communities in the lead up to the 77th WHA 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 behaviors 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 marginalization, 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 minoritized sexual orientations; gender-diverse people; people engaged in sex work; people who are or have been criminalized 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 [the WHO Handbook on Social Participation for UHC](#) 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 through initiatives like the European [Youth4Health Network](#) established by WHO Europe. Civil society has also welcomed this agenda, facilitated by the WHO's establishment of a [Civil Society Commission](#) that enables regular dialogues with civil society groups, overseen by the Director-General.

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

“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 institutionalizing social participation at the WHA in 2024. A series of regional and multi-stakeholder consultations were held to inform a [Technical Background Paper](#), which summarizes priority actions for Member States as they seek to institutionalize 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 organizations 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 WHA

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 - remain priorities for decision makers at all levels.

Opportunity to engage

Ahead of the WHA, the governments of Thailand and Slovenia, supported by Brazil, Norway, France, Tunisia, and Madagascar, are pushing for [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, institutionalize and sustain meaningful social participation in all health-related decisions through:*

- (1) Strengthening government capacities for the design and implementation of meaningful social participation;*
- (2) Ensuring equitable, diverse and inclusive participation;*

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

Thailand and Slovenia have since convened Member States and civil society in dialogues (termed “informals”) to refine the zero draft and build momentum around the draft resolution.

Currently, there is a critical window for civil society to influence the negotiations and strengthen the language in the resolution. By working together to advocate to the relevant decision-makers, we can increase the chances of this resolution being approved, with our key asks included.

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

The following are key actions for Member States to move towards institutionalizing 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](#). More specific priorities are outlined in [this personalizable document](#).

- **Investing adequate, stable, and predictable financial resources** to support social participation with particular emphasis on marginalized and vulnerable groups.
- **Building government capacities** to design and implement meaningful participation and facilitating the **capacity strengthening of populations, communities, and civil society**, which may involve legal reforms to empower civil society and communities.
- **Establishing and/or strengthening spaces** for sustained regular participation, including necessary **legal and institutional arrangements**.
- **Monitoring and using data routinely** to evaluate participatory processes and their impact on decisions made. For this, we request WHO to lead a consultative process—involving civil society and communities, among other actors—to produce a monitoring framework for social participation.

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

At national level

- Using resources such as [this directory of Permanent Missions to the UN at Geneva](#), identify the relevant focal points for your country:

- Within the Ministry of Health (at capital level), including delegations attending the UNGA High-Level Meetings in September 2023, and the WHO EB in January 2024, and the WHA in May 2024.
- Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including the delegations attending the WHO EB in January 2024, and the WHA in May 2024, as well as the focal points for health within the country's missions in New York and Geneva.
- Confirm whether your country is a member of the WHO Executive Board (EB) using [this directory](#) and who the representative is. If your country is on the EB, they can be instrumental in endorsing a resolution to go through to the WHA.
- Lobby the various key actors to convey key messages and ensure they will be included in the country positions for global moments, including the EB/WHA in 2024.
 - Key processes include:
 - Drafting and negotiating a WHA resolution (September 2023-January 2024).
 - Endorsing the WHA resolution at the EB in January 2024 and the WHA in May 2024.
 - Building awareness and support at the national level for your country to champion social participation/community engagement in international agreements (including the political declarations of the UNGA High-Level Meetings and the WHA resolution), and to follow-up on implementation.
- Activities for civil society include:
 - Send a letter and/or organize a meeting/event with key focal points to share key messages and asks on social participation (you may use/adapt [our advocacy letter template](#))
 - Ask relevant focal points to support and possibly co-sponsor a WHA resolution on social participation.

At global level

- Mobilize international networks/coalitions to support this advocacy and convey messaging on institutionalizing social participation:
 - Send a letter to the WHO Director-General requesting him to champion social participation.
 - Make sure that members of the WHO Civil Society Commission champion this agenda in that space.
 - Include social participation in constituency statements at the WHO Executive Board (EB) meeting in 2024.

Reference materials

- [WHO Social Participation for Universal Health Coverage Technical Paper](#) - the paper, prepared by the WHO, provides a comprehensive overview of strategies, principles, and

recommendations to institutionalize social participation in health decision-making processes.

- [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.
- [Voice, agency, empowerment - handbook on social participation for universal health coverage](#) - 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 institutionalizing new or existing participatory health governance mechanisms.
- [Social participation for universal health coverage: Technical paper](#) - This technical paper distills key messages from the Handbook, along with feedback from a multistakeholder consultation process to identify recommended priority actions for Member States to institutionalize social participation in decision-making processes for health.
- [SPHERE, Social Participation for Health, Engagement, Research and Empowerment](#) - A partnership between civil society, academic and health organizations, 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, emphasizes the pivotal roles of civil society and communities in advancing UHC, alongside key actions Member States can take to promote meaningful, inclusive social participation.
- [Advancing Social Participation for Universal Health Coverage - Civil Society Advocacy Brief](#) - A 4-page document developed by the CSEM and Save the Children to guide civil society actions towards building support for a WHA resolution on social participation in the decision-making process for health in countries. The brief provides background information, key advocacy asks and identifies milestones in the lead up to the 77th World Health Assembly taking place in May 2024, including the three UN high-level meetings on health held in September 2023.