

CIVIL SOCIETY INCLUSION IN MULTILATERAL SPACES

PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE



Australia's role in COP31 is an important opportunity to show leadership in inclusive, effective, and rights-based climate governance. As President of Negotiations, Australia has both the responsibility and the influence to engage civil society in ways that build legitimacy, improve outcomes, and strengthen trust among diverse stakeholders.

Central to that is ensuring that women and gender-diverse people are meaningfully represented in leadership roles, provided equitable opportunities to be heard, and able to influence negotiations across a range of issues relevant to COP31 and the outcomes.

This paper outlines high-level principles of good practice for equitable civil society inclusion in multilateral spaces, with a particular focus on ensuring that women in all their diversity are meaningfully engaged and these principles are applied in the context of COP31.

WHY CIVIL SOCIETY INCLUSION IS IMPORTANT

Meaningful civil society participation in climate governance is not optional or symbolic. It is essential for governments to ensure inclusion to uphold human rights, and ensure the effectiveness, legitimacy, and credibility of multilateral processes. This is critical in global climate negotiations that affect communities, livelihoods, and ecosystems worldwide.

Legitimacy and trust: Inclusive processes strengthen the legitimacy of multilateral decision-making by ensuring that those affected by decisions have opportunities to contribute. Civil society participation builds public trust, both in Australia and internationally, and strengthens confidence in negotiated outcomes.

Better policy and outcomes: Civil society organisations bring expertise, lived experience, and practical knowledge particularly from frontline and marginalised communities that governments cannot provide alone. The knowledge held within these communities is critical to developing policies that are realistic, effective, and responsive to local contexts. Women play a crucial role as they often hold deep knowledge of ecosystems and diverse lived experiences gained through their leadership in natural resource management and community stewardship. Indigenous women also hold unique cultural knowledge and expertise in caring for Country. Recognising and engaging with these inputs helps ensure that climate policies are realistic, effective and responsive.

Equity, meaningful representation, and leadership: Climate impacts are not experienced equally. Women, Indigenous peoples, Pacific countries, and Majority World communities are often among the most affected, yet remain under-represented in decision-making spaces. These communities also hold critical knowledge, lived experience, and transformative climate solutions grounded in resilience, adaptation, and community-driven practice that can strengthen global responses. Inclusive engagement helps address these imbalances in access, and should extend beyond representation to include opportunities for leadership and influence.

There is growing recognition of the need to strengthen and reform aspects of UNFCCC processes to ensure they are more inclusive, transparent, and equitable. As President of Negotiations, Australia has a role in shaping not only its own approach, but also influencing broader practices within the COP process.

Australia's existing policy commitments to gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights, Indigenous engagement and partnership with the Pacific provide a strong platform to work from. And these policy commitments – alongside Australia's track record of promoting human rights defenders and civil society participation in other fora – create strong expectations from global civil society that Australia will uphold and champion these principles throughout its partnership with Türkiye.

PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

The following principles reflect established good practice in civil society engagement across multilateral forums. They are intended to be flexible, context-sensitive, and adaptable to COP31 planning and delivery. They apply both to Australia's engagement with domestic civil society, as well as its global mandate for civil society engagement as part of COP31.

Principle 1: Resource participation of diverse women, including time, travel, training & tools

Overview

Underpinning all these principles is the need for resourcing to support diverse civil society participation, including funding for time, travel, training and tools. This is particularly important for gender equality and women's rights organisations and advocates, as well as other marginalised voices such as Indigenous peoples, rural communities, LGBTQIA+ communities and persons with disabilities, who face additional barriers.

Addressing barriers such as travel costs, visa processes, and language access enables broader representation. Without these forms of support, participation often becomes dependent on self-funding, which systematically excludes many frontline and community-based organisations and those from marginalised groups. Similarly, safety and human rights can be a concern for Environmental and Human Rights Defenders, women's rights organisations and LGBTQIA+ communities.

These barriers can concentrate influence among a small number of well-resourced actors and undermine the legitimacy and inclusiveness of multilateral processes.

The **Belem Gender Action Plan** commits Parties to: "Promote travel funds and capacity-building to improve the full, meaningful, and equal participation and leadership of women in delegations at United Nations Climate Change conferences, as well as funds for supporting the participation of Indigenous Peoples, grass-roots local communities from developing countries, the least developed countries and small island developing States, and encourage Parties and relevant organizations to share information on travel funding."

Specific Recommendations

To support the effective participation of women in all their diversity in COP31, **the Australian Government should:** Allocate funding – including to cover time, travel, training and tools – to support equitable and inclusive participation and bridge knowledge gaps around technical multilateral spaces.

- Ensure human rights and safety considerations of marginalised communities are addressed to enable their full participation.
- Advocate for the creation of a Presidency Gender Climate Champion (similar to the Presidency Youth Climate Champion) to draw high-level attention to the intersectional vulnerabilities of climate impacts for women and gender-diverse people and shine a spotlight on the lessons of inclusive and effective feminist climate leadership. Such a role should be seen as additive to support for diverse women's participation at all levels.

Examples from other fora

Across environmental and conservation processes, initiatives that centre Indigenous and women's leadership have demonstrated the value of inclusive engagement. For example, the WWF Oceania First Voices Forums held in 2022, 2024, 2025 have supported Indigenous Leaders from Australia, Aotearoa NZ, Solomon Islands, PNG and Fiji to share knowledge, strengthen collaborations, and elevate Indigenous perspectives in regional and global environmental governance. Convening these Indigenous Led spaces is critical in centring and elevating Indigenous People and Local Community leadership for COP31 and beyond. Similarly, through Nature's Leading Women, The Nature Conservancy has convened women from grassroots to government across Asia Pacific to share knowledge, strategise, and strengthen their agency and influence in environmental decision-making spaces. Resources are dedicated to ensuring women – particularly Indigenous women in remote communities – are not excluded due to financial, geographical or social barriers and can meaningfully and safely participate. Amplifying the voices and expertise of women through inclusive engagement is essential to addressing our planet's most pressing climate and environmental challenges.

Principle 2: Early and Strategic involvement

Overview

Civil society engagement should begin before positions and agendas are fixed, and continue throughout negotiation, delivery, and follow-up phases. Engagement that takes place only after priorities have been set and processes are advanced limits the ability of civil society to contribute meaningfully. It also undermines trust of communities in government and in international decision-making processes. Within the COP process, there are key moments in the negotiation cycle after which positions can become significantly harder to influence. For example, the development of national priorities, pre-COP consultations, coordination and alignment within blocs, intersessional meetings, and drafting phases. Providing equitable opportunities for meaningful civil society input early in these stages helps ensure that their diverse perspectives are included.

Continuous engagement ensures that dialogue does not end once positions are tabled. Ongoing communication allows governments and civil society to respond to changing contexts and maintain alignment on shared goals.

Examples from other fora

In previous years, Australia has opened a process several months in advance for written submissions from civil society on the priority theme of the Commission on the Status of Women, in order to shape Australia's engagement in the annual conference and negotiations process.

Examples from other fora

Within the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), structured engagement mechanisms like the International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity for Indigenous Peoples have provided predictable entry points and funding for participation, and helped embed traditional knowledge within negotiations.

Specific Recommendations:

To balance structured and responsive channels of engagement through the COP31 process, **the Australian Government should:**

- Provide formal opportunities for civil society engagement, for example through written submissions, roundtables and official briefings, to ensure structure and transparency.
- Invest in strategic relationships, informal conversations and two-way communication channels with diverse civil society actors – especially those with direct connections to women and gender-diverse communities – to build trust, share sensitive information and solve problems in real time.
- Hold dedicated consultations with women in all their diversity, as well as other marginalised communities including gender advocates, LGBTQIA+ communities and Indigenous communities, to ensure their voices are heard. The Women and Gender Constituency, along with other formal constituencies of the UNFCCC, provides a strong starting point for engagement.

Principle 3: Multiple channels of engagement

Overview

Effective civil society inclusion requires more than formal consultation mechanisms. While written submissions, roundtables, and official briefings are important, engagement is strengthened when governments also recognise the value of informal dialogue and trusted exchanges.

Multilateral negotiations are fast-moving and complex. Informal conversations, bilateral meetings, and exchanges outside formal settings often allow clarification of issues, early identification of risks, and more open discussion. These interactions help reduce misunderstandings before positions become fixed, and strengthen trust and relationships.

Designing engagement processes that go beyond one-off consultations and instead provide multiple ways for civil society to contribute throughout planning and negotiations are an essential component of meaningful and inclusive civil society consultation.

Examples from other fora

Track II diplomacy provides a model for informal dialogue and has been effectively used in the peace and security space for decades, for example through the [Pacific Women Mediators Network](#).

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Principle 3: Transparency

Overview

Transparent and predictable processes are essential for meaningful civil society participation. When engagement structures lack clarity - particularly around timelines, decision-making points, and opportunities for input - participation can become reactive or symbolic rather than meaningful. Predictability and advance notice are especially important in enabling equitable participation. This can be particularly important for women, who often hold care responsibilities in addition to paid work, for civil society groups with limited resources and for those living in rural and remote areas, who all need to plan travel or other expenditure in advance.

Transparency should also include feedback on outcomes. This means acknowledging civil society contributions, explaining how input has influenced positions, and clarifying constraints where recommendations cannot be adopted. These feedback mechanisms strengthen trust and reinforce the value of continued engagement.

Examples from other fora

As part of the development of the International Gender Equality Strategy, DFAT [published a consultation summary](#) highlighting the key themes of over 600 submissions and consultations.

Specific Recommendations

To ensure predictability and effectiveness of civil society engagement throughout the COP31 process, and build trust across sectors, **the Australian Government should demonstrate transparency by:**

- Clearly communicating how decisions are made and who is responsible at different stages of the process. This includes outlining the relevant decision-making structures, identifying key actors and authorities, and explaining how inputs from consultations will be considered within negotiations or policy development processes.
- Providing regular updates and engage in dialogue with civil society on the issues under negotiation, including information about the process and entry points for influence.
- Setting expectations through communicating whether consultations are intended to gather broad perspectives, seek technical input on specific issues, or inform the development of negotiating

Taken together, these principles, lessons and recommendations indicate how COP31 can be strengthened through well-resourced, early, strategic, flexible and transparent civil society engagement.

Embedding this approach would position COP31 – and Australia’s role as President of Negotiations within it – as a model of inclusive multilateral engagement, demonstrating that effective climate leadership is strengthened by meaningful civil society participation.

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