

Civil Society Participation in the Age of AI: Beyond Digital Black Boxes

A concept paper

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence is increasingly used to mediate consultation, participation, and decision-support processes in governments, international organizations, and private platforms. While AI-enabled systems can widen access, reduce administrative burdens, and help process large volumes of stakeholder input, they may also create new forms of exclusion, opacity, and unaccountable power when designed as digital black boxes. This paper examines the implications of AI-mediated participation for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and argues that the central challenge is not technology itself, but the governance frameworks surrounding its use. Building on prior CSEND work on participatory monitoring, digital inclusion, standards, and democratic digital architectures, the paper develops a reform agenda centered on transparency, traceability, accessibility, explainability, independent review, and meaningful feedback loops. It further situates these concerns within recent calls by leading AI developers for stronger regulation and public oversight. The paper concludes that a legitimate digital future depends on designing AI systems that serve society rather than requiring society to adapt to opaque systems. Civil society participation must therefore become a core principle of AI governance in national, international, and multilateral settings. Raymond Saner & Lichia Saner Yiu CSEND, Geneva, Switzerland 19 April 2026

Background and Rationale

This side-event focuses on the challenges posed by the growing use of digital platforms and AI-assisted consultation tools by the United Nations and international organizations. While such

systems are often introduced in the name of efficiency, scale, and innovation, they may unintentionally hinder meaningful participation by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) when they operate without sufficient transparency, accessibility, accountability, or feedback mechanisms.

For the purpose of this side-event, a **digital black box** refers to digital participation systems that collect, sort, summarize, classify, or filter stakeholder input without disclosing the governing rules of data capture, storage, analysis, prioritization, and feedback. The challenge is therefore not only technical opacity but also a governance deficit that affects accountability, inclusiveness, procedural legitimacy, and public trust.

Current practices often leave important questions unanswered: Who collects the data? Where are the submissions stored? How are they analyzed? Is AI used for filtering or summarizing submissions? Will the collected data be made publicly available? How are stakeholder contributions reflected in final reports, resolutions, or policy recommendations? These concerns become more urgent as AI tools are increasingly used in survey design, language processing, summarization, and decision support.

Prior CSEND research on participatory monitoring has argued that digital systems should support citizen participation, inclusiveness, and transparency rather than merely extract data for expert processing. Monitoring should be an ongoing process drawing on multiple data sources, common communication templates, and open feedback loops. These principles are directly relevant to AI-enabled participation systems used by international institutions.

The issue also has an inclusion dimension. CSEND research on older persons and digital products has shown that digital systems can create exclusion when interfaces change too quickly, support is unavailable, or institutions assume universal digital readiness. AI-based consultation tools must therefore be inclusive by design and accessible to older persons, persons with disabilities, and participants with limited digital literacy.

A further governance question concerns technological architecture. Where possible, public participation systems should rely on open, inspectable, interoperable, and auditable digital infrastructures rather than opaque proprietary platforms. Commons-based and open-source approaches can strengthen trust, accountability, and user control over participation data.

Finally, the governance of AI-based participation systems should be understood as a multi-actor and multi-institutional policy challenge involving UN secretariats, member states, CSOs, standards bodies, technical providers, and affected users. It therefore requires clear mandates, minimum standards, and structured dialogue rather than ad hoc experimentation.

Emerging Calls for AI Regulation and Public Oversight

Recent statements by leading AI developers reinforce the urgency of governance reform. In testimony before the United States Senate in May 2023, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman stated that advanced AI requires regulatory guardrails, external oversight, and licensing for highly capable systems. Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei has similarly argued that frontier AI systems may create

substantial societal and security risks if developed without safety standards, evaluation requirements, and international coordination. Comparable warnings have been echoed by researchers and industry leaders in open letters calling for stronger governance, independent audits, and risk mitigation measures.

These interventions are significant because they come not only from regulators or civil society critics, but also from actors directly involved in building frontier systems. As AI increasingly shapes access to information, public discourse, and administrative decision-making, governance cannot be limited to data protection alone. It must also include transparency of ranking and recommendation systems, accountability for automated decision support, procedural safeguards for affected persons, and meaningful participation by stakeholders in the design of digital rules.

Policy Objectives and Reform Agenda

This paper calls for examining the digital black box phenomenon and for generating practical proposals to improve CSO participation in digital AI-driven interactions driven by governments, private sector companies, International Organizations, and large CSO organizations, be they foundations, faith-based organizations, or large advocacy organizations.

Specific Objectives

- 1. Rethinking CSO Participation**

Re-evaluate current concepts of meaningful civil society participation in the digital age and explore what effective engagement looks like when consultations are increasingly mediated by digital and AI tools.

- 2. Transparency in Data Governance**

Identify policy options requiring public disclosure of methods used for data gathering, storage, analysis, AI-assisted summarization, and use of submissions.

- 3. Traceability and Feedback Mechanisms**

Ensure that CSOs can track their submissions, receive updates, and understand how their contributions influenced final outputs.

- 4. Inclusive Design and Accessibility**

Promote digital participation tools that are usable by older persons, digitally vulnerable groups, and participants from lower-resource settings, with human support available where needed.

- 5. Better Digital Tools for Participation**

Encourage sufficient technical and financial investment in tools designed to enhance participation rather than merely automate administration.

- 6. Standards and Governance Principles**

Discuss minimum standards for AI-assisted participation systems, including transparency, explainability, accessibility, retention policies, redress procedures, and independent review.

- 7. Best Practices and Institutional Learning**

Share examples from national, regional, and international initiatives where civil society has been effectively integrated into policymaking through digital tools.

Proposed Discussion Questions

- What constitutes meaningful participation when engagement is mediated through AI-enabled platforms?
- Should UN and IO digital consultation systems disclose whether AI is used in sorting, summarizing, or prioritizing submissions?
- How can institutions ensure that digital participation does not exclude vulnerable or less connected groups?
- What minimum governance standards should apply to AI-based surveys and consultation systems?
- Can open-source or interoperable platforms improve trust and legitimacy?
- How can CSO inputs be visibly connected to final policy outputs?

Expected Outputs

1. A concise set of **minimum principles for AI-enabled CSO participation**.
2. A draft **disclosure template** for digital consultations covering data collection, storage, analysis, and AI use.
3. Recommendations on **feedback and traceability mechanisms** for participants.
4. Guidance on **inclusive design standards** for digitally vulnerable users.
5. A proposal for a **pilot review mechanism** to assess whether AI-supported participation tools are transparent, inclusive, and accountable.
6. Identification of opportunities for continued collaboration among CSOs, UNECE, and partner institutions.

Conclusion

The expansion of AI-mediated participation creates both promise and peril. Used well, digital tools can widen access, reduce costs, enable multilingual engagement, and help institutions process large volumes of submissions. Used poorly, they can deepen exclusion, obscure responsibility, and convert participation into a symbolic exercise without influence. The central policy task is therefore not to choose between technology and participation, but to govern technology in ways that strengthen democratic legitimacy and social inclusion.

As argued in earlier CSEND work on ICT and the social solidarity economy, digital transformation should be guided by public purpose, user empowerment, and democratic accountability rather than narrow efficiency metrics or concentrated platform power. A humane digital future depends on whether institutions design technologies that serve society instead of requiring society to adapt to opaque technologies. This principle applies with particular force to AI-enabled participation systems used by governments and international organizations.

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