

The UN ECOSOC NGO Committee and Civil Society Participation in the UN Process

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Abstract

This article argues that while UN action on North Korean human rights has centered on the Human Rights Council, General Assembly, and Security Council, the role of the UN Committee on NGOs—gatekeeper to Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) consultative status—remains undeservedly overlooked. Dominated by anti-human rights undemocratic regimes, the Committee often blocks human rights defenders from participating in the UN system. Despite this, a few organizations—the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK), the People for Successful Corean Reunification (PSCORE), the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB), and Christian Solidarity Worldwide—have managed to secure consultative status thanks to determined advocacy by like-minded states such as the U.S., Canada, the U.K., and South Korea. These cases, however, remain exceptions. The article contends that a more strategic, long-term effort is needed to diversify Committee membership by encouraging democratic states like South Korea and Japan to seek seats, replacing members with poor human rights records. This endeavor will take more than just international cooperation among the like-minded. Overcoming internal bureaucratic resistance and prioritizing resources for NGO Committee membership would expand access for credible NGOs, strengthen international civil society, and ultimately increase pressure on the North Korean regime to address its human rights abuses.

Keywords: UN ECOSOC Consultative Status; North Korean Human Rights; NGO Accreditation; Civil Society; Human Rights Defenders; UN Advocacy; UN Reform; the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea; HRNK; ECOSOC Reform; China and Russia at the UN; NGO Accreditation Barriers

¹ This article is based on the author's direct participation in and observation of the ECOSOC NGO accreditation process.

Introduction

What is UN ECOSOC Consultative Status?

The first point of access for NGOs to participate in formal UN deliberations was through the ECOSOC. Forty-one NGOs were granted consultative status by the Council in 1946; by 1992 over 700 NGOs were in consultative status and the number has been steadily increasing ever since to 6626 organizations today.

Article 71 of the UN Charter set the stage for consultation with NGOs.¹ The consultative relationship with ECOSOC is governed by ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31, which states the eligibility, rights and obligations of NGOs in consultative status.² The same resolution also lists the procedures for the withdrawal or suspension of consultative status, the role and functions of the ECOSOC Committee on NGOs, and the duties of the UN Secretariat in supporting the consultative relationship. Consultative status is granted by ECOSOC upon recommendation of the ECOSOC Committee on NGOs.

Pursuant to ECOSOC resolution 1981/50 of 20 July 1981, the NGO Committee has 19 members, based on equitable geographical representation: 5 members from African States; 4 members from Asian States; 2 members from Eastern European States; 4 members from Latin American and Caribbean States; and 4 members from Western European and other States.³ In accordance with ECOSOC decision 70 (ORG-75) of 28 January 1975, the NGO Committee members' term is four years.⁴

Who and How?

To be eligible for consultative status, an NGO must have been in existence and registered with the requisite government agencies as an NGO/non-profit for at least two years. The NGO must have established headquarters, democratically adopted bylaws, as well as the authority to speak for its members. The NGO must have a representative structure, such as a board of directors or governing council. It must also rely on adequate mechanisms and levels of accountability, democratic decision-making and transparency. The funding of the organization should mostly come from contributions of national affiliates, private actors, or from individual members. Organizations established by governments or intergovernmental agreements are not considered NGOs and will not be granted consultative status.

- **General, Special and Roster Status:** Currently, there are 6,626 organizations in consultative status. The three categories of consultative status include: General Consultative Status (138 NGOs); Special Consultative Status (5,521 NGOs); and Roster Status (967 NGOs).
 - General Consultative Status is reserved for large global NGOs, dealing with most of the issues on the agenda of ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies.
 - Special Consultative Status is granted to NGOs focused on a certain area of expertise, concerned with a handful of fields of activity within the competence of ECOSOC. These tend to be smaller NGOs, and NGOs established relatively more recently.
 - Organizations that apply for consultative status but do not fit in other categories are usually included in the Roster. These NGOs tend to have a more technical focus and include organizations that have some type of formal status with other UN bodies or specialized agencies, such as FAO, ILO, UNCTAD, UNESCO, UNIDO, WHO and others. The Roster lists NGOs that ECOSOC or the UN Secretary-General regard as capable of making “occasional and useful contributions to the work of the Council or its subsidiary bodies.”⁵

The Utility of Holding Consultative Status

1. **Logistical Control.** Logistically, it is tremendously helpful. An NGO can have its own accreditation issued for the year, both in New York City and Geneva. This is extraordinarily helpful, as one no longer must depend on colleagues at organizations with consultative status for inclusion in delegations. It is also very helpful that one can contact UN logistical personnel directly to make requisite arrangements for events. Thus, one can maintain full logistical control of UN side events.

2. **Independent Delegation.** An NGO in consultative status can have its own delegation. It is always problematic to actively participate while being a member of another NGO's delegation.
3. **Side Event Authority.** An NGO in consultative status can co-host its own side events at the UN.
4. **Elevated Visibility.** Consultative status elevates the profile of an NGO. Whenever one makes a statement as an accredited NGO, those statements carry even more weight. There are requests that are directed only to accredited NGOs, such as, for example, a 2022 petition led by UN Watch, protesting North Korea's presidency of the nuclear disarmament conference in Geneva.
5. **UPR Speaking Rights.** Only NGOs in consultative status can make a two-minute oral statement during the interactive dialogue on the UPR.
6. **Remote Participation Access.** Only NGOs in consultative status and no office in Geneva can send a video recorded message to the interactive dialogue on the UPR. If resources are scarce, this option comes in very handy, as in-person travel may not be necessary. As evidenced during COVID, if only virtual participation is possible, NGOs in consultative status possess a significant advantage.
7. **Institutional Leverage in Disputes.** If an NGO is harassed by bad actors at the UN, it is easier to get out of trouble if it holds consultative status.

In October 2018, HRNK hosted a UN side event on North Korean human rights featuring Ambassador Jonathan R. Cohen, then Deputy Permanent Representative of the United States to the United Nations. UN staff tried to shut down the event under the pretext that HRNK was holding an event "critical of a UN member state." Consultative status enabled HRNK to get out of trouble through a heated conversation between the

executive director and UN logistical staff, an exchange HRNK thoroughly recorded and documented.

8. **Credibility of Publications.** Consultative status enhances the authority of publications and documentation provided by the respective NGOs, even though such publications were also authoritative prior to acquiring consultative status.
9. **Underdog Credibility.** Donors, friends, supporters, and followers like “the underdog story,” the fact that an NGO received consultative status despite opposition by bad actors.

In the case of HRNK, it was Russia, China, Cuba, Venezuela, Iran and other “beacons” of human rights and democracy that initially rejected consultative status in the NGO Committee.

10. **Strategic NGO Networking.** Consultative status improves an NGO’s capacity to network with other NGOs, in HRNK’s case especially North Korean defector-run NGOs. Other NGOs approach their colleagues in consultative status with proposals to co-host side events, knowing that they have the requisite platform and access.

Participation in International Conferences

As a rule, NGOs in consultative status must receive accreditation if they wish to participate in international conferences summoned by the UN and in meetings of the preparatory bodies of such conferences.

Acquiring ECOSOC Consultative Status: The HRNK Experience

Campaign Overview

In May 2015, HRNK submitted an application for UN consultative status to the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations of the United Nations ECOSOC. The NGO Committee is a standing committee of ECOSOC, established by ECOSOC resolution 3(II) on the 21st of June 1946 (Economic and Social Council, 1946).⁶ Pursuant to rule 82 of its rules of procedure, the Committee reports directly to ECOSOC. Its report includes draft resolutions on matters calling for ECOSOC Action.

HRNK’s application was considered and subsequently deferred three times. In order to escape deferrals ceaselessly engineered by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Russian Federation (RF) in particular, the US Mission to the United Nations (USUN) brought HRNK to a vote by the NGO Committee on February 2, 2018. Out of 19 NGO Committee member states, 5 voted in favor of HRNK consultative status, 9 against, 2 abstained, and 3 were absent (Table 1).

Table 1. UN NGO Committee 19-Member Vote

YES (5)	NO (9)	ABSTAINED (2)	ABSENT (3)
Greece	Burundi	India	Azerbaijan
Israel	China	Sudan	Guinea
Turkey	Cuba		Mauritius
United States of America	Iran		
Uruguay	Nicaragua		
	Pakistan		
	Russian Federation		
	South Africa		
	Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)		

This procedure was the only way for HRNK to “get out of jail” and avoid being deferred indefinitely. The risk involved is that, if the 54 ECOSOC member management meeting sustains the NGO Committee rejection, the NGO is “benched” and not allowed to apply for consultative status for the following three years. Subsequently, the NGO Committee recommendations went to the larger management meeting of all 54 ECOSOC member states. The management meeting addressed the NGO Committee rejection of both HRNK and the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC).

HRNK’s case was spearheaded by USUN, and IHRDC was supported by Canada, with critical support from EU member states. HRNK needed a simple majority to overturn the Committee decision and obtain consultative status. This is a procedure that had had a 100 percent success rate by then. In recent years, organizations including Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Freedom Now had followed the same path to obtain consultative status. But in order to be successful, HRNK couldn’t rely on USUN alone. Most of those who opposed consultative status for HRNK did so on procedural grounds. By reaching out to UN ECOSOC member states, conducting in-person meetings and briefings with both friends and foes, and providing information on our research findings and

recommendations, HRNK strived to highlight the substantive aspects pertaining to the human rights situation in North Korea.

The ECOSOC Outreach Campaign

USUN embarked on a robust lobbying campaign on behalf of HRNK. Taking into consideration that the United States is a UN ECOSOC member, according to the US Mission, demarches were sent to all 53 capitals of the remaining members, asking for support. Diplomatic notes were sent to all 53 UN missions in New York City. Ambassador Nikki Haley and Ambassador Kelley Currie asked for the support of the 53 UN missions while participating in other meetings. USUN made targeted phone calls. Both Ambassadors Haley and Currie closely engaged in this targeted outreach.

HRNK aggressively engaged in a concentrated UN campaign. One goal of this campaign was to reinforce alliances with like-minded states, with the aim of requesting that they issue statements supporting HRNK's consultative status while focusing on the substance and quality of HRNK's work. Another goal of the campaign was to pursue "swing votes" of countries that abstained, were absent, or even voted against HRNK. A number of these countries did not vote against HRNK because they disagreed with the substantive issues, but they voted as such because they had an issue with procedure, claiming that HRNK had not waited long enough to be considered by the UN NGO Committee. HRNK's UN campaign efforts to secure consultative status concentrated on substance and the results of its investigations, in order to present a persuasive case, in conjunction with USUN's efforts.

As expected, the UN NGO Committee vote, dominated by China, Russia, and their proxies, went against HRNK. The NGO Committee recommendations subsequently went to the larger management meeting of all 54 ECOSOC member states (Table 2).

The ECOSOC Resolution

At 10 am on April 17, 2018, the 54 member UN Economic and Social Council took action on a resolution to grant UN consultative status to HRNK.

The resolution, introduced by the United States and co-sponsored by Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands,

Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and the United Kingdom, passed with 29 votes in favor, 6 against, and 13 abstentions. Six ECOSOC member states were absent.

Table 2. The 54 UN ECOSOC Members in April 2018

Afghanistan	Germany	Romania
Algeria	Ghana	Russian Federation
Andorra	Guyana	Rwanda
Azerbaijan	India	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
Belarus	Iraq	Somalia
Belgium	Ireland	South Africa
Benin	Italy	Spain
Cameroon	Japan	Sudan
Canada	Lebanon	Swaziland
Chad	Malawi	Tajikistan
Chile	Mexico	Togo
China	Morocco	Turkey
Colombia	Nigeria	United Arab Emirates
Czech Republic	Norway	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
Denmark	Peru	United States of America
Ecuador	Philippines	Uruguay
El Salvador	Republic of Korea	Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)
France	Republic of Moldova	Viet Nam

Afghanistan, Andorra, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Ghana, Iraq, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Morocco, Norway, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Spain, Togo, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States, and Uruguay voted in favor.

Belarus, China, Russian Federation, South Africa, Venezuela and Vietnam voted against.

Algeria, Benin, Chad, Ecuador, El Salvador, India, Lebanon, Peru, Rwanda, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Sudan and Tajikistan abstained.

Cameroon, Guyana, Malawi, Nigeria, Somalia and Swaziland were not present.

UN consultative status tremendously amplified the already strong voice of HRNK as an organization dedicated to promoting human rights for the people of North Korea through UN channels. UN consultative status was a significant landmark in the 23-year history of HRNK.

This was more than a victory for HRNK and other organizations endeavoring to promote observance of human rights in the DPRK. This was a victory for civil society and its participation in informing the UN process.

Conclusion

In April 2022, ECOSOC members elected the 19 members of the NGO Committee for the following 4-year term (2022-2025). The only regional group which presented a competitive slate was Eastern Europe. Armenia, Georgia, and Russia competed for the two available spots. The other 17 members were elected without a vote, by consensus. For the first time in 75 years, Russia was voted out of the Committee, just one week after the General Assembly had adopted a historic resolution to suspend Russia's Human Rights Council membership. However, even in Russia's absence, the NGO Committee continues to be populated by a majority of UN member states with a troubled human rights record.

Current members include Algeria, Cameroon, Eritrea, Liberia, and Zimbabwe (Africa); Bahrain, China, India, and Pakistan (Asia-Pacific); Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, and Nicaragua (Latin-America and the Caribbean); Armenia and Georgia (Eastern Europe); Israel, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Western Europe and other States).

Moving forward, international NGOs can help strengthen and sharpen UN action on North Korean human rights. Through international civil society and its networks, Global South UN member states can be further involved in the effort to tackle the North Korean human rights crisis, an endeavor currently led by Global North "like-minded" member states including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, the EU, the Republic of Korea, Japan, and others. In order to open wide the gates of participation, more North Korean human rights defenders need to have a fair shot at acquiring ECOSOC consultative status.

One way to ensure broader access to the UN process through acquiring consultative status is to substitute undemocratic NGO Committee members—many of them Russian and Chinese allies or proxies—with members who are willing to stop playing procedural games and instead focus on substance, on a real human rights agenda. While China and India may be nearly impossible to dislodge from the NGO Committee, the Republic of Korea and Japan could surely play a much more positive role, at least compared to the likes of Bahrain or Pakistan. Naturally, this would take South Korean government agency coordination and prioritization of

resources toward the NGO Committee within consideration of membership in other UN bodies. Supporting true human rights defenders, including North Korean human rights defenders, by balancing the membership of the NGO Committee would also require overcoming inherent institutional, bureaucratic, and cultural biases against NGOs and their staff. To improve the human rights of the North Korean people and hold the Kim regime accountable, barriers to consultative status set up by undemocratic members of the NGO Committee must be torn down.

Appendix A

HRNK Information Sheet Shared with UN Country Missions

Mission: To raise international awareness of the human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and improve the human rights of the more than 20 million North Koreans living there through the publication of well-documented reports.

Our Work: HRNK is the leading U.S.-based bipartisan, non-governmental organization in the field of DPRK human rights research and advocacy. Since 2001, HRNK has dedicated itself to telling the story of human rights in North Korea through in-depth research and publications. The organization's well-documented studies have established its reputation and leading role in the international network of organizations committed to promoting human rights in the DPRK and to designing solutions for improving the situation there. HRNK has published more than thirty major reports documenting the status of North Korean compliance with fundamental human rights standards embedded in United Nations (UN) treaties and documents, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which the DPRK has accepted.

As a non-governmental organization, HRNK is independent from the direction of any government. It is the objectivity, impartiality, and quality of HRNK's reports that have established its reputation and leading role in the network of human rights, humanitarian assistance, and policy organizations focused on North Korea. The UN, governments, civil society, and the media regularly cite HRNK's research.

HRNK and the United Nations: UN agencies and officials have long regarded HRNK as a reliable source of information and analysis. Most recently, the report of the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres on the situation of human rights in the DPRK (A/72/279 dated 2 August 2017 and released 28 August 2017) cited HRNK's report "North Korea, Flooding at *Kyo-hwa-so* No. 12, Jongo-ri" (2016).⁷ HRNK also cooperated closely with the UN Commission of Inquiry on human rights in the DPRK (UN COI), providing the UN with information and

recommendations from HRNK's research and publications. Eight of HRNK's Board and Advisory Council members, report authors, and resident fellows testified before the UN COI in Washington, D.C. The detailed UN COI report (A/HRC/25/CRP.1) quoted HRNK 19 times.⁸

HRNK's work has enhanced the goal of the UN to promote observance of human rights in the DPRK.

Appendix B

Statement by the United States Mission to the United Nations, February 5, 2018⁹

The UN Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) has voted against granting consultative status for two qualified American NGOs. Both the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC) and the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) are leading NGOs in their fields. The IHRDC works on establishing a comprehensive and objective historical record of the human rights situation in Iran, while HRNK works on promoting human rights in North Korea through research and advocacy. Both NGOs have a long track record of success and have amply demonstrated that they would add value to the UN system.

“It’s a shameful day at the UN when Iranian and North Korean human rights violations are protected. A UN committee that is supposed to give a voice to those who most need it is instead being steamrolled by countries with terrible human rights records themselves. The United States stands with human rights defenders and will continue to fight for access for qualified NGOs to the United Nations system,” said Ambassador Haley.

The decision for accreditation can be reconsidered and potentially reversed by the UN Economic and Social Council as early as April 2018. Members of the NGO Committee who voted against the accreditation of HRNK and IHRDC include Burundi, China, Cuba, Iran, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Russia, South Africa, and Venezuela.

Notes:

¹ United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice* (San Francisco: United Nations, 1945), <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/ctc/uncharter.pdf>

² United Nations Economic and Social Council, *Resolution 1996/31: Consultative Relationship between the United Nations and Non-Governmental Organizations*, July 25, 1996, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/UPR/ECOSOC_RES_1996_31.pdf.

³ United Nations Economic and Social Council, *Composition of the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations*, E/RES/1981/50, July 20, 1981, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/32704?v=pdf>

⁴ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. “Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations,” accessed August 4, 2025. <https://www.un.org/esa/coordination/ngo/committee.htm>

⁵ United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, “UN System Engagement with NGOs, Civil Society, the Private Sector, and Other Actors,” (Geneva: UNCTAD, October, 2005), p. 240, https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ngls20052_en.pdf

⁶ United Nations Economic and Social Council, Resolutions adopted by the Economic and Social Council during its 2nd session held in New York from 25 May to 21 June 1946, Official Records, 2nd Year, 2nd Session, (E/43/Rev.2), Resolution 3(II), p. 360, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3845514?ln=en&v=pdf>

⁷ Joseph S. Bermudez Jr. and Greg Scarlatoiu, North Korea: Flooding at Kyo-hwa-so No. 12, Jongu-ri (Washington, DC: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2016), https://www.hrnk.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/eng/Kyo-hwa-so-No_-12-Flooding.pdf

⁸ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Detailed Findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea*, A/HRC/25/CRP.1 (February 7, 2014), <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/25/CRP.1>.

⁹ U.S. Mission to the United Nations. “Press Release: UN Committee Blocks Qualified American NGOs, Protects Iran and North Korea Human Rights Abuses.” *U.S. Department of State (Archived)*, February 5, 2018. <https://2017-2021-translations.state.gov/2018/02/05/press-release-un-committee-blocks-qualified-american-ngos-protects-iran-and-north-korea-human-rights-abuses/>.