

Building a world community

# mondial

Canadian Edition

*Published by the World Federalist Movement, a non-governmental organization that advocates more just and effective global governance through the application of the principles of democratic federalism to world affairs.*

VOL.2, ISSUE 2  
DECEMBER 2018

## Towards a UN World Citizens' Initiative

by Andreas Bummel

While the establishment of a citizen-elected United Nations Parliamentary Assembly remains a key federalist goal, it is possible to pursue complementary efforts towards strengthening global democracy. One such innovation that the Congress of the World Federalist Movement in The Hague supported unanimously this year is a UN World Citizens' Initiative (UNWCI).

While government-initiated popular plebiscites put forward by elected or non-elected rulers can be highly problematic, instruments of direct democracy, if designed in a right way, can mobilize the positive energy of the citizenry. They can help regain citizen trust in democracy and provide a way to strengthen their political voice. Even in the intergovernmental realm, recent initiatives such as the 1 for 7 Billion Campaign on the selection of the UN Secretary-General or the My World 2015 survey on the Sustainable Development Goals have shown that it is possible to engage millions of people in UN-related issues.

An example and inspiration to draw upon when imagining citizen participation at the UN is the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), the only existing transnational tool of participatory democracy. The ECI was introduced with the Lisbon Treaty on the European Union (EU) that entered into force in 2009. The instrument allows for citizens to identify a problem, propose a solution and submit their proposal to the European Commission for review if they manage to mobilize the support of at least a million EU citizens. So far, there have been four successful initiatives and six others are still open.

A similar instrument could be established at the UN to allow for citizens' input. The fundamental idea of a UNWCI is that if a certain threshold of world citizens endorses a citizen-launched initiative, UN bodies such as the UN General Assembly or the Security Council would have to put the item on their agenda and give representatives of the initiative the floor to make their case. Ideally, the UN General Assembly would follow up

and adopt recommendations based on the UNWCI in question or launch an intergovernmental process to adopt or modify relevant treaties. We anticipate that an instrument such as a UNWCI will support the emergence of better synergies and collaboration among civil society worldwide and of a citizen-based global political sphere.

Democracy Without Borders has aligned with Cologne-based Democracy International and with the support of other NGOs such as WFM, CIVICUS and Global Justice Now we are building an alliance that will develop the UNWCI proposal and launch a campaign ahead of the upcoming 75th anniversary of the UN in 2020 which we hope will be used as an opportunity for innovation and reform, as the UN2020 civil society initiative suggests. While the ECI offers a strong example to draw upon, conceptualizing a UNWCI will come with its own challenges, as of course the EU and the UN differ in fundamental ways.

However, just as the EU realized that an element of participatory democracy is important to strengthen the connection between the EU and its citizens, the same thinking should apply to the UN today. A 'magic tool' that the UN General Assembly may be able to use to establish a UNWCI, once all details have been figured out, is Article 22 of the UN Charter, which allows the Assembly to "establish such subsidiary organs as it deems necessary for the performance of its functions." The creation of a consultative mechanism like a UNWCI could be seen as a win- win scenario and as part of the UN General Assembly's long-sought revitalization.

*Andreas Bummel is Coordinator for the UN Parliamentary Assembly campaign.*