

Human Rights Council 44th session
(30 June – 20 July 2020)

Interactive Dialogue with the High Commissioner for Human Rights

Joint statement on Civil Society Space

I have the honour to deliver this statement on behalf of the core group on civil society space, namely Chile, Ireland, Japan, Sierra Leone and Tunisia [as well a large, cross-regional group of States [, and a number of civil society organisations].

The [long version of this statement, including the] full list of co-signatories is available on the extranet.

Madame High Commissioner,

This core group first took the initiative of a Council resolution on civil society space in 2013.

We did so in light of what we saw as two equally true but very different realities:

- first, the transformative role which civil society can and does play, alone or in partnership with other stakeholders; and
- second, that civil society space is all too regularly, and unfortunately increasingly, restricted and threatened.

In the intervening period, our commitment to this initiative has not diminished, in fact quite the opposite, we have established new frontiers.

We remain deeply committed to highlighting at this Council, the critical importance of protecting and promoting a safe and enabling environment for civil society.

In normal times, we would have presented a resolution to this Session of the HRC.

But these are not normal times, so, for practical reasons, we have decided to raise these important issues by way of a Joint Statement.

In this Joint Statement, we take the opportunity to draw attention to the concerns that persist for civil society including *inter alia*: diversity of participation; attacks, reprisals and acts of intimidation against civil society actors; shortcomings in access and accreditation processes; the use of legal and administrative measures to restrict civil society activity; and the particular challenges that have emerged in recent weeks and months by the almost wholesale move to online methods of communication and engagement-

We also pay tribute to the significant steps forward that international organisations and States have taken to foster and encourage the meaningful participation of civil society, set out in the High Commissioner's report presented at this Session¹. This report also noted that significant

¹ <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/44/25>

further steps are needed, such as: increasing support to and empowering civil society, including human rights defenders, in particular women's rights and environmental defenders and journalists; and expanding the space in which civil society operates through better laws and policies and improved protection mechanisms.

Realisation of these steps would bring to bear the immense benefits of this participative approach to policy formulation and implementation, as emphasised by the Secretary-General in his "Call to Action"².

Madame High Commissioner,

The people that States in this room represent are facing the challenge of a generation in dealing with COVID19 and its devastating impact, particularly in terms of the many, many lives lost, on every continent.

In responding to, and rebuilding from this crisis, we must recognise, as articulated by the UN Secretary-General, and as emphasised by this Council in the recently adopted Presidential Statement on the human rights implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of human rights in shaping the response to the pandemic, both for the public health emergency, and the broader impact on people's lives and livelihoods.

We welcome your statement, Madame High Commissioner, that civil society must be included in every stage of response to the COVID19 pandemic³.

We would encourage you therefore Madame High Commissioner, to ensure that the essential role of civil society, and States' efforts to protect and promote civil society space, are reflected in the report that you will present to the 46th Session of the HRC, as mandated by the recent Presidential Statement⁴.

There will be many lessons to be learned from our experience of recent weeks and months if we are to build back better, by protecting fundamental freedoms in the face of crises and addressing structural inequalities.⁵

We stand ready to learn.

And we undertake to bring to a future Session of this Council, a resolution that will build on a more comprehensive examination of the key challenges and opportunities that have emerged and will set out concrete steps for States to take to realise open civic space for the benefit of all.

Thank you

²https://www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/atoms/files/The_Highest_Aspiration_A_Call_To_Action_For_Human_Right_English.pdf Pg 8,

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25785&LangID=E>

⁴ <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/43/L.42>

⁵ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25785&LangID=E>