

Joint civil society letter on civil society organizations' (CSOs) participation at the Human Rights Council

The undersigned organizations would like to register their concerns with regards to shrinking civil society space at the Human Rights Council (HRC) and more globally in U.N. spaces.

While this trend of increasing barriers to civil society's participation to global and multilateral processes has been going on for years, there is no denying that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and accelerated it, widening and deepening inequalities between civil society organizations (CSOs) with a Geneva presence and ECOSOC status and others without.

This ongoing exclusion of CSOs represents a danger to accountability and contributes to a culture of impunity within global advocacy spaces.

More specifically, specific measures taken in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic set a dangerous precedent in terms of CSOs' meaningful participation. While the undersigned organizations fully understand public health constraints and the necessity to protect one another in a global health emergency, certain emerging practices do not seem to be dictated by health imperatives. For instance:

- **General Debates**

- The removal of general debates in the June session, which is when many reports and discussions related to gender and women's rights take place, has had an immense negative impact on civil society participation, and in particular on women human rights defenders and those working to combat violence and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, leaving many without speaking slots to address the Council. This, in a pandemic context that has exposed and exacerbated pre-existing systems of oppression globally, as well as shrinking civil society space across the world and in this Council. The limited speaking slots for NGOs in interactive dialogues, just 15 minutes for all NGOs, cannot be considered a substitute for general debates in the June sessions.
- We recall that general debates are the only moment in the agenda where NGOs are guaranteed an opportunity to highlight and address situations that are not on the Council's agenda, but should be, and they are the only spaces where every ECOSOC-accredited NGO can be assured of a chance to speak. This space is essential for the Council's ability to achieve its prevention mandate as NGOs can bring to the Council's attention situations at imminent risk of a human rights crisis.

- **Efficiency measures**

- We are concerned by the renewal for another year of the 'efficiency' measures piloted in 2020, without meaningful assessment of their impact on civil society participation in a year also impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Timeliness of communications**

- We understand the delays in organizing the session due to the election of the President of the Council. Nevertheless, the late communication of civil society participation modalities in the 46th session, and late invitations to the few avenues in which civil

society is consulted on participation, do not allow for meaningful and wide consultation of NGOs, including those out of Geneva and in the Global South. In addition, the lack of direct communication channels and consultation of civil society regarding the UN budget crisis and its consequences is indicative of the low priority afforded to civil society participation in that context.

- **Participation to online informals**

- Since the inception of the HRC, CSOs have had unrestricted access to informal negotiations, something which has greatly benefited delegations and the outcome of negotiations alike. However, the lack of accessibility to links to join informals and the reliance on delegations to share them with CSOs contributes to shrinking civil society space and creates inequalities of treatment and access between organizations. Online informals might also pose online safety challenges.
- The deletion of Webex access links from public access on Sched has created unnecessary confusion, work and difficulties for CSOs, whose resources and capacity are already scarce. We recall that CSOs including non-ECOSOC accredited were able to listen to informals through the UNOG [website](#).

- **Intersectional discrimination**

- Civil society organizations, especially young representatives, representatives from organizations of the Global South and representatives with disabilities, already faced significant obstacles to participating in Council sessions due to visa-restrictions and insufficient accessibility measures. The ‘recovery’ phase of the pandemic and vaccine inequalities with additional and potential discriminatory visa regulations may further prevent participation from organizations and activists from the Global South. Accessible, full, equal, effective and meaningful civil society participation through hybrid and online will remain essential in the pandemic aftermath in order to ensure equal opportunities for civil society from all regions to bring important issues to the attention of the council.

Civil society participation cannot be an afterthought.

The current practice of **video statements** by NGOs marks an important opportunity to enable those affected directly by human rights violations to speak to the Council and should continue beyond the COVID-19 exceptional measures. However, this should not replace in-person participation in the future. While we welcome the fact that plenary proceedings are now webcast live in all UN languages, the recordings of HRC plenary meetings continue to be available only in English and the original language, effectively preventing non-English speakers from following Council meetings, especially those in different time zones who cannot follow them live.

We urge States to **reinstate general debates in the June sessions**. We also urge States to **preserve the open-ended nature of the General Debates**, and maintain the option of video intervention also in General Debates, in order to preserve civil society participation, which is a key and unique feature of the Council that is essential to the fulfilment of its mandate.

We also request the reinstatement of public access to online informal negotiations for civil society organizations. Preserving this access is crucial and cannot be left to individual core groups.

Members of the Human Rights Council have the duty to uphold the highest standards of human rights. This should start within the chambers of the Human Rights Council by conscious decisions made to enable rather than to prevent the meaningful participation of CSOs.

The integrity, credibility and legitimacy of the Human Rights Council as the highest U.N. political body tasked with addressing human rights situations depends on it.

Sign-on

1. Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW)
2. Association for Progressive Communications (APC)
3. Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)
4. Center for Reproductive Rights (CRR)
5. Child Rights Connect
6. Conectas Direitos Humanos
7. International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF)
8. International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
9. MenEngage Alliance
10. Plan International
11. Rutgers
12. Sexual Rights Initiative (SRI)
13. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)