

Statement at the informal consultations held on 19 February 2018 regarding the 2018 programme of work of the UN Human Rights Council

Thank you Mr President,

On behalf of ISHR, CIHRS and FIDH, we appreciate the opportunity given to us today and last week to participate in the informal conversations around strengthening the Council's effectiveness. However, we regret that civil society has not been consulted in the initial formulation of the bureau proposal, and are particularly concerned that civil society not based in Geneva has virtually no ability to feed into the process.

Such input is crucial if the Human Rights Council is to have legitimacy and impact on the ground.

We also understand that consultations with various regional groups have taken place since the last public informal, while again civil society seems to have been left out of the process.

This is even more regrettable given the potential of the proposal to disproportionately and negatively affect NGO participation in the Council, both in terms of overall speaking time and the range of issues that can be addressed at each session.

It is important to take into consideration that several civil society organizations on the ground have already booked their flights and organized their side-events to correspond with the current program of work published online by OHCHR. We understand that States have budgetary considerations for the functioning of the HRC, but so do civil society organizations. Any change in the March session program of work will be costly for organisations on the ground and might result in several civil society organizations not participating in the session.

That said, we acknowledge some improvements in the draft programme of work since the last consultation, in particular the elimination of the arbitrary distinction between thematic and country specific agenda items.

However, as noted above, particularly non-Geneva based civil society organizations have not had the chance to provide their inputs on how the proposed changes might affect their work. Accordingly, we strongly call on you, Mr President, and on the facilitators appointed by the Bureau to correct the record in this regard. It is the duty of the President and Bureau to ensure that all facilitators treat all observers in the Council equally, be they observer States or NGOs. We expect the facilitators to consult early and fully with civil society, including as they examine alternative measures to save time.

We also reiterate the principle that any proposed change to the working methods of the Council should be proportionate, and affect all stakeholders equally.

Whereas States, including observer States, can currently speak in all General Debates and Interactive Dialogues, NGOs are in practice limited in the number of interactive dialogues they can address. Therefore, any proposal that touches only on the General Debates means that civil society participants

are put at a disadvantage, because General Debates represent relatively more of the overall speaking time for NGO observers.

We therefore suggest that more time be allocated for civil society organisations consultation particularly with civil society organisations on the ground. If this is not possible, we urge that any changes made in the March session be used by the Council to examine how the time savings affect the different stakeholders, including members States, observer States and observer NGOs, and then launch discussions again in April to address the restructuring of the agenda for the coming sessions this year.