

**“Ensuring effective engagement and contributions from civil society stakeholders  
in areas under discussion in the Third Committee”**

*Informal meeting of the UN General Assembly Third Committee convened by the Chair with  
ECOSOC accredited NGOs*

*21st February, 2023 Conference Room 4, UN Headquarters New York*

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President of the General Assembly, Chair, Member States and civil society colleagues

This is a joint statement, delivered on behalf of a coalition of NGOs engaging with the Third Committee.

We welcome this meeting with civil society following the recent Third Committee session - the third meeting of its kind. We would like to express thanks to the current Chair for two historic firsts: a civil society meeting at the beginning of the last session of the Committee, as well as the current agenda item which I have the opportunity to speak on - on the topic of enhancing civil society participation. We sincerely appreciate your commitment and leadership in these developments and also welcome the attendance of states in the room as a commitment to engagement with civil society.

Every day in every part of the world, civil society contributes to the promotion, protection and advancement of human rights. Countless civil society actors such as non-governmental organisations, activists, civil society coalitions, networks, social movements, charities, faith-based groups, and trade unions advocate for a better future based on shared goals of justice, equality, and human dignity. A dynamic, diverse and independent civil society, that is able to operate freely, in a knowledgeable and skilled manner with regard to human rights, is crucial to the implementation of human rights in all regions of the world.

With membership of all 193 Member States of the United Nations, the GA is the largest UN body responsible for addressing global human rights issues with the Third Committee at the centre of this debate. Given this critical role, it is an extremely important space for civil society to advocate for the UN and Member States to address human rights violations and promote respect for human rights for all.

The role of NGOs, in particular, is acknowledged in the UN's founding document - Article 71 of the UN Charter names ECOSOC as the body to develop 'suitable arrangements for consultation' with NGOs. ECOSOC resolution 1996/31, speaks to an 'evolving relationship' between NGOs and the UN, acknowledging "the breadth of non-governmental organisations'

expertise and the capacity of nongovernmental organisations to support the work of the United Nations”.

The right of NGOs to communicate and cooperate with UN bodies is an incident of the rights to freedom of expression, association, public participation and subject to the principle of non-discrimination. It is codified in specific human rights treaties, and the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders adopted 25 years ago. Restrictions on these rights must accord with international law, by fulfilling a legitimate purpose, and be reasonable, necessary and proportionate. Further, fair, transparent, expeditious and accessible non-discriminatory processes must be in place to appeal and review any restrictions on these rights of civil society. States have obligations to uphold the fundamental freedoms of civil society by not only desisting from violating these rights but also fulfilling positive responsibilities to enable access and participation, including taking practical steps to ensure effective engagement.

Despite civil society’s right to access and participate in UN bodies and processes without barriers and fear of reprisals, it has no formal interaction with the Third Committee, apart from these meetings. This is in stark contrast to active civil society participation at the Human Rights Council (NGOs have the ability to make and circulate statements, host their own side events, and attend and participate in informal negotiations). and inconsistent with the standards of civil society participation even in some General Assembly main committees.

Civil society faced additional challenges this year in even keeping abreast of information regarding informal negotiations that was once again not shared in the UN journal. This year, this information was only published on the e-deleGATE platform to which civil society has no access. These fundamental barriers in access to information harm civil society participation and deprive the Committee of civil society’s expertise while negotiating resolutions.

Accessible and timely information is a necessary precondition to stakeholder engagement and effective contribution to UN bodies. The absence of information in the UN journal was raised by several civil society members during the last meeting between the Third Committee and civil society in October last year, and we regret that in spite of assurances provided, the issue was not addressed. Furthermore, we are disappointed that civil society was only invited to the present meeting last Friday, the last business day before the meeting. Similarly, last year civil society received an invitation to an Our Common Agenda (OCA) briefing organised by the PGA, hours after the briefing had concluded.

Despite these significant barriers, civil society continues to engage with the Third Committee’s work in a range of ways: engaging with diplomats and ministries, including on resolutions; observing and reporting on open meetings; hosting side events together with States; and in some cases sitting in on informal negotiations on resolutions with the invitation of facilitators. We sincerely thank States that sought inputs on resolutions from civil society before and

during this session and would like to express our great appreciation to States that have facilitated civil society attendance to the informal negotiations as observers in this session.

The simultaneity, speed, and depth of challenges like climate change, geopolitical instability, war, technological disruption, and intensifying social inequalities are testing the traditional human rights paradigm like never before - necessitating stronger partnerships between stakeholders committed to finding solutions. Partnering with civil society advances the UN's goals of building a better, safer and more sustainable world.

The value of civil society participation is regularly reiterated in UN resolutions adopted by this Committee— for example on human rights defenders, and on civil society space – and by States, UN officials and experts. The Secretary General's Our Common Agenda report envisions a "System wide policy that puts people at the center" and "a renewed social contract for the "We the peoples" of the UN Charter, anchored in human rights". Civil society also warmly welcomed the SG's Call to Action on Human Rights and the UN wide guidance on civic space issued in 2020. However, the current practices of the Third Committee are unfortunately a far cry from these goals as formal civil society inclusion at the Third Committee is almost absent or often an afterthought or box ticking exercise. We urge the Third Committee to audit the existing implementation of recommendations in these ground-breaking documents to identify gaps and take action to strengthen implementation.

I would like to conclude by proposing some concrete suggestions to improve civil society engagement at the Third Committee for the coming year. We encourage States, in particular members of the Bureau, as well as the UN to support access and effective participation for ECOSOC-accredited NGOs at the Third Committee:

- Through oral statements during general debates and interactive dialogues;
- Adding the schedule of informal negotiations back to the UN journal;
- Genuine consultations and interactive meetings with civil society prior during and after the session;
- Timely notice to civil society of opportunities for civil society engagement including an opportunity to inform the agenda where relevant;
- Hybrid modalities and timing for meetings such as this one that enable the most inclusive participation for NGOs around the world
- We also request facilitators of draft resolutions to extend invitations to civil society to participate in informals as observers, to benefit from civil society's expertise in strengthening the implementation of human rights.

I would also like to end by complementing the intervention made by Bobbi Nassar. Our coalition of organisations that closely engage with the Third Committee marked the conclusion of the 76th session with the shared observations on both thematic and country-specific resolutions; also urging States to implement the commitments made in the resolutions. This

summary is available on the website of the International Service for Human Rights as well as of other signatory members of the coalition.

I thank you again for this opportunity and look forward to the interactive dialogue.

### **Concluding remarks**

- Appreciate this space and the interactive dialogue - where States and civil society alike had an opportunity to engage with each other and discuss both the outcomes of the Committee's last session and also engage on the crucial issue of access and participation in this important UN body.
- We wanted to express our sincere thanks to Member States in the room who acknowledged the value of civil society contributions and also pledged their commitment to continuing to enhance participation to make it more meaningful.
- I am equally grateful to my civil society colleagues who engage closely with the committee who provided concrete and comprehensive suggestions on how we move towards a Third Committee that puts "the We the people" at the centre of a system that is anchored in human rights as I am inspired by the work of so many colleagues - as one of my colleagues mentioned we are driven by passion and our hopes for a more just and equitable world.
- As some have mentioned in the room, there was various progress made at the last session of the C3 in respect of both country and thematic resolutions. We welcome and call on States to also now commit to implementing commitments made in those resolutions
- We look forward to building on progress made this year, and we look forward to continuing to work together with you all to strengthen human rights protections for all

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