

# **The Belgrade Call to Action**

## **A Civil Society Call to Stand Together to Defend Peoples' Voices for a Just and Sustainable World**

### **Reverse the Closing and Shrinking Space for Civil Society**

### **Stop the Increasing Attacks on Human Rights Defenders and the Undermining of Democratic Participation**

### **Renew the Prospects for an Inclusive Agenda 2030 and the Full Realization of the SDGs**

**Launched in Belgrade, April 8, 2019**

**We, leaders from Global Civil Society**, coming from civil society organizations, activists and campaigners from all parts of the World, on this day in Belgrade call on international and national civil society to stand together and declare aloud: **Enough is enough! Stop the relentless attacks on civil society, social leaders and human rights defenders!**

The global community is currently moving down a path that will leave hundreds of millions of people behind; **real and transformative progress towards achieving the systemic changes for people and planet promised by Agenda 2030 will not be possible** without a fully engaged civil society and people's genuine participation through their organizations and communities.

It is deeply troubling that more than eighty percent (80%) of the world's population - 6 billion people living in 111 countries - face a situation where either the conditions are closed for civil society (23 countries), or where civil society is highly repressed (35 countries), or where civil society faces substantial legal and political obstacles (53 countries). [CIVICUS Civil Society Monitor] **In these countries there is little chance for a fully engaged and mobilized civil society**, which is an essential foundation for democracy, human rights safeguards, and progress on the SDGs and for a transformative Agenda 2030.

**We urge all Member States of the United Nations to take concrete urgent action to reverse these trends.**

Despite rhetorical promises of action by many Member States to "reverse the trend of shrinking civic space wherever it is taking place,"<sup>1</sup> **attacks on CSOs, social leaders and human rights defenders continue unabated.**

**Civic actors across many sectors are being threatened, persecuted and killed – including those supporting and representing rural communities, Indigenous peoples, journalists, trade unions, women's rights activists, LGBTQ\* activists, youth, people living with disabilities and environmentalists.** They are being harassed through arbitrary arrest, detention, the targeted use of legal and regulatory measures and restrictions on CSO finances. Others are deliberately discredited as criminals or "foreign agents." Civic leaders are being physically harmed, with women's human rights defenders facing sexual harassment and abuse. All because they seek to protect peoples' human rights, while promoting democratic participation on issues that affect their lives.

Real and transformative progress, leaving no one behind, in achieving core SDGs – including eradicating poverty (SDG1), eliminating hunger (SDG2), addressing gender and all forms of inequality (SDG5), reducing inequalities (SDG10), promoting decent work and sustainable livelihoods for all (SDG8), and taking action for climate justice and a just transition (SDG13) – will not be possible without a fully engaged civil society and

population. The strengths of civil society are its diversity, its rootedness in communities and territories, its direct development experience, and its capacities for public engagement.

**SDG 16, for peace, justice and effective institutions, is well beyond reach**, in places where civic space is closed and repressed, where civil society cannot freely act with poor and marginalized populations to contribute to and safeguard accountable and inclusive institutions.

The time for rhetoric and noble international statements and declarations is over. **The agenda is urgent, and the time to act is now.** Practical action is possible. We cannot wait until there is little space for CSOs and their leaders, for human rights activists and for peoples' voices and actions!

This **Belgrade Call to Action** is calling for specific commitments and actions, appropriate to each country, with an overarching reference in the **Political Declaration of the 2019 High Level Political Forum**, and with a timetable by which Member States can be held accountable.

**We call on all Member States, meeting in September 2019:**

- 1. To take concrete steps to protect and enable space for civil society**, including enabling laws and regulations, democratic accountability based on human rights norms and human rights standards, and the full protection of civil society under attack – such as social leaders, human rights defenders and gender equality activists.
- 2. To embed inclusion and meaningful accountability to people** in development practices.
- 3. To implement and respect democratic country ownership** of national development plans and implement transparency and accountability for inclusive SDG delivery.
- 4. To lead by example with concerted action** to challenge major human rights violations, including deteriorating conditions facing peoples' organizations, trade unions, women's rights organizations, indigenous peoples, and community-based environmentalists, among many others.
- 5. To recognise the importance of the inter-connected themes in achieving Agenda 2030** -- civil society voice, eradicating poverty, women's empowerment, fighting inequality, decent work, climate action and environmental justice.

Implementing an **Action Agenda** based on these commitments will require robust, pro-active and collaborative political leadership on the part of all Member States, Development Stakeholders and Civil Society Organizations.

**Civil Society is fully committed to the achievement of the SDGs.** But our efforts will be in vain, if we cannot count on new measures and actions at the local, national, regional and global level to reverse the debilitating trends that are shrinking and closing civic space.

We commit to raise these urgent concerns and demand action at all inter-governmental and preparatory meetings as the international community reviews progress in Agenda 2030 in the coming months and years.

This **Call to Action**, with an accompanying **Action Agenda**, is being launched simultaneously in countries around the world to draw attention to its urgency.

**Belgrade**  
**April 8, 2019**

---

<sup>1</sup> Nairobi Outcome Document, Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation.