

[Group of States calls for UN to expand access and participation rights for NGOs](#)

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A group of four States - Austria, Liechtenstein, Slovenia, and Switzerland - have called on the UN to expand access and participation rights to non-governmental organisations.



(New York) - Civil society plays a necessary role at the UN and space for it to engage effectively must be expanded and protected, said a [group of four States](#) (Austria, Liechtenstein, Slovenia, and Switzerland) at the UN General Assembly this week.

The group of States expressed strong support for the participation of civil society in the work of the UN, arguing that their suggestions and expertise “are a necessary part of a constructive and meaningful dialogue aimed at improving the implementation of international human rights obligations”.

However, all too often civil society representatives, including human rights defenders, face legal and practical restrictions to their work, as well as repression, intimidation, and threat to loss of life and limb, in an effort to stifle progress towards human rights, democracy, good governance and the rule of law.

Furthermore, an increasing number of these attacks occur against human rights defenders cooperating with the United Nations human rights system. The High Commissioner has pointed to the ‘alarming’ trend of intimidation and harassment of civil society actors and human rights defenders in reprisal for cooperating with the UN.

The statement also expresses ‘concern and disappointment’ at attempts to undermine the participation of civil society from within the UN itself, and in particular a worrying development [highlighted by ISHR last year](#) - the use of the ‘no-objection’ procedure to undermine NGO participation in UN meetings. Under this procedure, an NGO can only participate in a meeting at the UN if no State objects. The State that objects remains anonymous in most cases, there is no obligation for a State that objects to give any reasons or justification for the objection, and the NGO in question is not given an opportunity to respond to the objection.

As ISHR’s Madeleine Sinclair has stated, “the ‘no-objection’ procedure is severely flawed. Its arbitrary and ad-hoc nature not only risks excluding relevant and valuable voices, but can also lead to censorship and politically motivated exclusion of critical voices.”

“Despite rhetoric supporting the vital role that civil society plays within the UN, the procedure flouts basic principles of accountability, transparency and due process,” Ms Sinclair said.

As Austria, Liechtenstein, Slovenia and Switzerland point out, it is up to member States to act on their responsibility to create and protect an enabling environment for civil society and allow for their meaningful and unhindered participation in States’ work, be it nationally or at the UN.

ISHR calls on all States to follow suit in reaffirming the valuable role that civil society plays in UN processes, and rejecting the no objection procedure in future resolutions dealing with modalities for General Assembly processes.

Photo: UN Photo