

## Political interests continue to distort the decisions of the NGO Committee, but this time the world is watching

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The moment for serious reform of the UN Economic and Social Council's NGO Committee has come.



The [report](#) has been issued on one of the most shameful sessions of the ECOSOC NGO Committee, where misplaced political interests were once again clearly evident in the Committee's practice. In contrast with prior meetings of the Committee however, this session was observed by a high number of States and NGOs many of whom expressed concern at what they were witnessing. When allied with the [statements made by key UN officials](#) and [over 230 non-government organisations](#), it is clear that the moment for serious reform of the Committee has come. The upcoming session of ECOSOC in July provides such an opportunity.

The tone of the session was set early on with a strong push back by some Committee members to a request by the US for the floor to be given to an NGO to make a general statement. The statement was finally permitted – an unprecedented step – and ISHR spoke to concerns expressed by over 230 NGOs from 45 countries around the world in [an open letter to ECOSOC members](#) about the practice of the Committee. Attempts were then made by China and Cuba to try to erase reference to the statement from the record of the session, but were successfully resisted including through statements by Greece, Israel and the US.

Votes held by the NGO Committee against recommending accreditation for the Committee Protection of Journalists, and for the Youth Coalition on Sexual and Reproductive Rights (YCSRR) then clearly highlighted the concerns expressed by the NGOs.

'When an organisation protecting journalists, and an organization of young people working on sexual and reproductive rights are blocked from the UN, you know the system is deeply flawed.' said, ISHR's Eleanor Openshaw. 'Implementation of key UN agendas such as Agenda 2030 rely on the engagement of civil society organisations. Blocking them is arbitrary and motivated by political considerations that have no place in the work the NGO Committee.'

These cases and the practice of the Committee in general were highlighted by several global media outlets, and prompted expressions of dismay and concern by key UN officials and observer States.

The UN Secretary General [expressed deep concern](#) about 'a disturbing pattern of actions against NGOs whose work is essential to progress' around the world and 'even within the UN'. 'We cannot allow this authoritarian impulse to silence NGOs,' he noted.

The Special Rapporteur on the rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association issued a [Commentary](#), noting that since his 2014 report to the GA where he expressed concern and outlined a series of recommendations, 'not much has changed'.

A case the Special Rapporteur has consistently highlighted – that of the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) – was considered for the 18th time and received 2 more questions from India, taking the number of questions it has received from this one country to 77. The US noted that was time this case was resolved. Host country, Denmark made no statement in support of the applicant.

The record of applications recommended for consultative status and those deferred during the session showed once again that human rights organisations face the greatest obstacles to accessing the UN. The Committee recommended to the Economic and Social Council 188 organizations for consultative status and deferred 235 for further consideration at its regular session in 2017. Human rights organisations faced approximately 50% less likelihood of being recommended for accreditation at the session than organisations working on other issues such as development, humanitarian concerns, education. Around 70% of new applications by human rights organisations were deferred. Deferred human rights applicants faced approximately an 8% chance of getting accreditation. As in past years, those working on sexual and reproductive rights, or caste-based

discrimination were amongst those most likely to be deferred.

In a positive development, over 40 observer States attended the session – an unprecedented number – with several making statements and echoing calls first made by Chile, Mexico and Uruguay, for webcasting sessions of the NGO Committee to increase transparency of the sessions and enable NGOs with applications pending to follow proceedings from afar.

Webcasting was one of the aspects of the working methods of the Committee discussed at an informal meeting of the Committee at the end of the session. The Secretariat clarified the practice for open meetings of bodies such as the Committee is 'based on request and upon availability of funding'. No conclusion was reached.

'Some States have been known to voice objections to webcasting sessions of the NGO Committee based on cost. It is understood that covering the two sessions of the NGO Committee a year would cost the equivalent of \$48 per UN Member State per year. Cost is not a real obstacle,' said Ms Openshaw.

'We call on those States that have witnessed and expressed concern about the practice of the Committee to channel this toward support for reform. There are opportunities to do so at the current Human Rights Council session and – in a very concrete way – through the introduction of a resolution on working methods of the Committee at the upcoming ECOSOC session in July', said Ms Openshaw 'Now is the time for States to stand up for civil society access to and participation in the UN'.

The dates of the sessions of the NGO Committee in 2017 will be 30 January to 8 February and 22 to 31 May.

#### **Related articles:**

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[230 NGOs call for defence of freedom of association at the UN](#) 25.05.2016