

09 April 2019

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Civil Society Summit in Belgrade unites CSO leaders, reps in fight for civic freedoms and democratic participation

09 April 2019, Belgrade, Serbia – At the Civil Society Summit held in Belgrade, Serbia, around 150 leaders and representatives of civil society organisation (CSOs) gathered to unite in the fight for democratic participation and civic freedoms.

The day-long event opened with the welcome remarks of Serbia’s Office of Civil Society Cooperation Director Zarko Stepanovic, who explained that the sustainable development goals (SDGs) process must include partnership of public administration, citizens, and CSOs to promote real development.

This was followed by a backgrounder on the summit, presented by CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) Co-Chair Justin Kilcullen, CIVICUS Chair Anabel Cruz, and Civic Initiatives Programme Director Bojana Selakovic.

“We are gathered here to call on development actors to address issue of closing civic space, attack on civil society workers and human rights defenders (HRDs), and attack on the democratisation of development” said Kilcullen. “We are here to put a stop on the attacks against HRDs, and measures of States of constrain civic spaces. 111 countries are suffering serious civic space restrictions,” Cruz added.

United Nations Assistant Secretary General for Strategic Coordination Fabrizio Hochschild delivered his keynote address, which acknowledged the difficulties faced by civil society, as well as their role: “There is retreat in multilateral commitments and rise of geopolitical conflict. Inclusive, whole-of-society approach is disregarded, civic space is curtailed, stigmatisation and public harassment are on the rise. CSOs are feeling the effect of these first hand... the work and energy of civil society is more important than ever. And despite all the challenges it faces, civil society remains strong and vital.”

A panel featuring prominent civic leaders then discussed the harms of closing civic spaces and attacks on human rights defenders in different contexts. Speakers included Just Associates Advisor Marusia Lopez Cruz, IBON International Director Emeritus Antonio Tujan Jr., ActionAid CEO Adriano Campolina, and Climate Action Network Deputy Executive Director Sarah Strack. CIVICUS Secretary-General Lysa John facilitated the session.

CPDE Co-Chair Richard Ssewakiryanga and InterAction Director Carolyn Aeby introduced the Belgrade Call to Action, a declaration that asks United Nations Member States to act to reverse the closing and shrinking space for civil society, to stop the attacks on human rights defenders and the undermining of democratic participation, and to renew the prospects for an inclusive Agenda 2030, and the full realisation of the SDGs.

Case studies on shrinking civic spaces – and how the civil society fought back – were shared by Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND)'s Anas El Hasnaoui, and Nigeria Network of NGOs Director Oluseyi Babatunde Oyeibisi.

For his part, El Hasnaoui talked about his organisation's work on civic space and the state of CSO enabling environment in the Middle East and North Africa region, while Oyeibisi discussed how Nigerian NGOs resisted an NGO regulation law in 2017 which would regulate CSO operations and curtail people's freedom for association, expression and political participation.

Indigenous Peoples Movement for Self Determination and Liberation Coordinator and CPDE Co-chair Beverly Longid facilitated the case studies session. In her synthesis, Longid said that there are different manifestations of shrinking space, which include legal and regulatory restrictions, diminishing and closing spaces for participation, criminalisation of defenders and activists, continuing harassments, intimidations, and extrajudicial killings of human rights defenders and CSO workers. There has also been a wave of legal vilification of NGOs through NGO regulation and human security laws, like the one in Nigeria. Longid ended her synthesis by challenging CSOs to continue the fight of those who came before us by maximising the little space that CSOs have, pushing for collective rights, and doing good in policy and advocacy work from a perspective of strength.

Attendees also paused for a solemn remembrance of CSO leaders, rights defenders, environmentalists, and journalists who were killed because of their fight for people's rights and social justice, and participated in workshops on promoting and engaging the Belgrade Call to Action.

The event ended with closing remarks by CIVICUS Board Member Julia Sanchez, Global Call to Action against Poverty Program Chair Beckie Malay, and Pacific Islands Association of NGOs Executive Director and CPDE Pacific regional representative Emele Duituturaga. Duituturaga reminded fellow CSO leaders and workers on the need to come together to defend the values of human rights, social justice, and solidarity that are now under attack globally. CSOs need to build resistance from bottom up and rise together to deliver the promise of development.

Civil society leaders endorsed the Call and committed to move the work forward.

The Civil Society Summit 2019 was organised by the CPDE, CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation, Balkan Civil Society Development Network, Action for Sustainable Development (A4SD), and Civic Initiatives (Gradjanske Inicijative). The Summit was part of the CIVICUS' International Civil Society Week 2019 on April 8 to 11.

Check out #CivilSocietySummit2019 #CSOPartnership #StandTogether on Twitter and Facebook, or visit the following sites to learn more:

CPDE: [CSOPartnership.org](https://www.csopartnership.org), Twitter: @CSOPartnership_, Facebook: @CSOPartnerships

CIVICUS: [CIVICUS.org](https://www.civicus.org), Twitter: @CIVICUSalliance, Facebook: @CIVICUS

A4SD: [Action4SD.org](https://www.action4sd.org), Twitter: @Action4SD

BCSDN: [balkancsd.net](https://www.balkancsd.net), Twitter: @BCSDN, Facebook: @balkancsd.net

Civic Initiatives: [gradjanske.org/en/](https://www.gradjanske.org/en/); Twitter: @gradjanske, Facebook: @GradjanskeInicijative

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