

Addressing shrinking civil society space in developing countries

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The Committee on Development adopted an own-initiative report drawn up by Teresa JIMENEZ-BECERRIL BARRIO (EPP, ES) on addressing shrinking civil society space in developing countries.

The Committee on Foreign Affairs, exercising its prerogative as an associated committee in accordance with [Article 54 of the Rules of Procedure](#), also gave its opinion on the report.

Members recalled that the civil society (which includes non-governmental and non-profit organisations) represented, together with the public and private sectors, the third sector of a healthy and decent society, as a necessary counterweight to the existing power in force.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have become important players in development aid at the global level, while the Cotonou Agreement recognises civil society as a key actor within ACP-EU cooperation.

Recognising the major role of civil society: the report stressed the importance of an independent, diverse and pluralistic civil society to ensure the development and stability of a country, to ensure democratic consolidation, social justice and respect for human rights, and also to promote accountability and good governance, particularly in the fight against corruption and violent extremism.

While the shrinking of space for civil society in developing countries, and particularly in conflict-stricken countries, is being carried out in increasingly complex ways which are harder to tackle and imposed through legislation, taxation, funding limitations, increased bureaucracy, Members called on the EU to recognise the need to provide guidance to governments, political parties, parliaments and administrations in beneficiary countries on developing strategies for establishing the appropriate legal, administrative and political environment to enable the efficient work of civil society organisations.

Protecting human rights defenders: concerned at the growing number of attacks on human rights defenders worldwide, Members called for the systematic denunciation of the killings of human rights defenders, and any attempt to subject them to any form of violence, persecution, threat, harassment, forced disappearance, imprisonment or arbitrary arrest.

The Union is invited to: (i) develop guidelines on the freedom of peaceful assembly and association; (ii) put in place monitoring tools for the effective joint implementation of EU guidelines on human rights defenders; (iii) ensure the protection and application of sanctions in the event of serious violations human rights; (iv) implement EU guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief.

The report also called on the EU to:

- work towards greater autonomy of civic space, not only through EU development and human rights policies, but also by integrating all other EU internal and external policies, including justice, home affairs, trade and security policies;
- continue to provide funding to create an enabling environment for civil society at the national and local levels;
- address the root causes of shrinking civil society space within the framework of a uniform and coherent approach in its relations with the third countries;
- promote institutional mechanisms and initiatives to strengthen dialogue and build partnerships between governments, CSOs, local authorities and the private sector in developing countries;
- monitor counter-terrorism measures and aspects of anti-money laundering and transparency legislation and anti-money laundering legislation;
- establish mandatory and legally enforceable human rights due diligence for the business activities conducted in third countries by companies based in the Union;
- strengthen the role of civil society actors in trade agreement institutions, which should contain binding clauses on human rights.

Benchmarks and indicators: Members called on the Commission and the EEAS to establish best practices and to develop clear benchmarks and indicators related to shrinking space in the context of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). They also advocated:

- increased European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) funds to address the shrinking space and the threats to human rights defenders;
- establishing a shrinking space monitoring and early warning mechanism;
- systematically including shrinking civic space in their bilateral relations between the Union and the Member States;
- improving protection of civil society organisation representatives in third countries in order to prevent any hostility against them.

Lastly, Parliament shall commit to establishing, on an annual basis, a list of countries where civil society space is most under threat.