



REGIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY JOINT STATEMENT ON THE ONSLAUGHT OF CIVIC SPACE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE IN EAST AFRICA

We, the undersigned representatives of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) operating within the East African Community and operating under the East African Community (EAC) Consultative Dialogue Framework (CDF) met through a webinar on 19th June 2020, convened by EACSOE Kenya Chapter, to discuss continued threats to civic space due to restrictions imposed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The discussion was prompted by the growing need to foster a more coordinated regional approach to address the severe threats to civic space in the EAC region.

We wish to commend the EAC partner states for taking actions to control the spread of Covid-19. We are aware, however, that various challenges have undermined efforts to have a collective approach to the pandemic. We, nonetheless, congratulate governments in the region for taking the pandemic as a serious threat to the health and wellbeing of their citizens.

State of civil society amidst COVID-19

The lack of a collective approach based on similar standards has meant that reactions to Covid-19 are largely in line with domestic governance conditions. In countries where civic space was already severely threatened, the directives have tended to be more severe. In such situations, Covid-19 restrictions have merely added to the factors that deny citizens their essential freedoms such as freedom to assemble, freedom to associate, etc.

We note further the rights to information and the freedom of expression have been threatened across the board. In their efforts to control the spread of disinformation, governments have targeted and undermined these rights. Human rights activists and social media influencers are among those who have experienced threats from the authorities due to the information shared on their social media platforms, mainly challenging the government to account for the use of funds. The media and journalists, already under severe constraints in several countries, have faced increasing challenges including threats to suspend licenses and harassment of individual journalists in the course of duty. There has been a surge in cases of police brutality in the process of enforcing restrictions thus undermining ongoing police reforms.

Even though we acknowledge the importance of necessary measures to control Covid-19, the widespread abuses of human rights especially by security forces, have undermined citizens' faith in what governments are doing to control the spread of the virus. In several cases, this has led to demonstrations, which in turn has created conditions for further spread of the virus. We, therefore, agree with the *African Commission on Human and Peoples' rights* and other human rights bodies across the world, which have emphasized that restrictions must be lawful and reasonable.

Given the above, and the need to continue building a prosperous Africa through continental and regional integration, we recommend the following to the governments of the six EAC partner states:

1. That there is a need to recognize and harness the leadership, mobilization and educational potential inherent in the civil society so that a more effective partnership approach is engendered in response to Covid-19;
2. Take immediate action to eliminate Extra-Judicial Killings (EJK) as well as other human rights abuses by security officials in charge of enforcing restrictions. Where such abuses have occurred, responsible state institutions must move with speed to investigate and bring to book those responsible. The state must also provide support to victims of such abuses;
3. That there is a need to continue working towards a collective approach to control of Covid-19 by the EAC partner states. This is partly necessitated by the need to handle practical challenges being currently experienced in the region such as the issue of truckers and movement of goods;
4. The collective approach envisioned above must be human rights friendly in line with the East African Community Treaty, which under "Establishment and Principles of the Community" (Chapter Two) emphasizes "adherence to universally acceptable principles of good governance, democracy, the rule of law, observance of human rights and social justice";
5. Observe the principles of accountability and transparency in all processes related to control of Covid-19. This includes procurement processes through which countries are sourcing material supplies for purposes of dealing with the pandemic. Partner States must, at all costs, mitigate against rent-seeking, profiteering and other forms of corruption;
6. Support community healthcare systems (such as Community Health Workers) as the first lines of defense in controlling the spread of COVID-19 due to their role in sensitization, supporting vulnerable communities at the village level, and in urban informal settlements. We note, for example, that community health workers and level one facilities require the provision of adequate protective gear, testing kits, and other materials; and

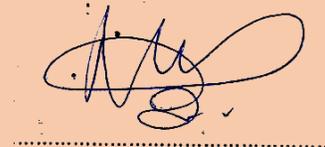
7. We support partner states call for debt relief to focus more resources on Covid-19. However, this does not preclude the need to bring to account those responsible for the accumulation of odious debts and large-scale looting.

In solidarity with the East African Community, partner states and Civil Society Organizations in East Africa Region.



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The statement is endorsed by

1. Tanzania Association of NGOs (TANGO)
2. Defenders Coalition Kenya
3. Development Network of Indigenous Voluntary Association (DENIVA)
4. The Uganda Association of Women Lawyers (FIDA-U)
5. Rwanda Women's Network
6. Rwanda Civil Society Platform (RCSP)
7. Burundi Journalists Union
8. Forum pour la Conscience et le Development (FOCODE)
9. Community Empowerment for Progress Organization (CEPO),
10. Freedom House, Tanzania
11. Civil Society Reference Group (CSRG)
12. Independent Medico Legal Unit (IMLU)

The East African Civil Society Organisations' Forum (EACSOFF) Kenya Chapter is a membership Non-Governmental Organization founded in 2013. It is the Kenyan Chapter of EACSOFF, which is based in Arusha and whose mission is to provide a platform and catalyze a critical mass of organized civil society to engage in need-driven, people-centered East Africa integration and cooperation process effectively and proactively for equitable and sustainable development. EACSOFF Kenya hosts the Protection of Civic Space in East Africa Platform (PCSEAP) which regularly assess, monitors and documents civic space trends and facilitates continued learning, sharing of best practices and innovative strategies for CSOs in East Africa.

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