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Subject: EU engagement with civil society in external relations
- Council conclusions (19 June 2017)

Delegations will find in the annex the Council conclusions on EU engagement with civil society in external relations, as adopted by the Council at its 3551st meeting held on 19 June 2017.

EU engagement with civil society in external relations

Council conclusions

1. The Council welcomes the progress achieved on the EU's engagement with civil society in external relations since the adoption of the related Commission Communication¹ and the Council Conclusions of 2012². It takes note of the various areas of progress highlighted in the Commission's report³ and looks forward to further progress in implementing the above-mentioned Conclusions.
2. The Council reaffirms that EU support to Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) should feature more prominently in all partnerships and a more strategic engagement with CSOs should be mainstreamed in all external instruments and programmes and in all areas of cooperation, in particular in EU Development Policy, the European Neighbourhood Policy and the EU Enlargement Policy.
3. As stated in the New European Consensus on Development, the EU and its Member States recognise the multiple roles that CSOs play as promoters of democracy, defenders of rights holders and of the rule of law, social justice and human rights. CSOs are both actors of governance and development actors in their own right and are, as such, key partners for the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the EU Global Strategy. Within multi-stakeholder frameworks CSOs also contribute to the implementation of development effectiveness principles, including the Istanbul CSO Development Effectiveness Principles⁴.

¹ 13788/12 - COM(2012) 492 final

² 14535/12

³ 8341/1/17 REV 1 - SWD(2017) 136/2 final

⁴ http://csopartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/hlf4_72.pdf

4. The Council stresses the importance of CSOs in the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as their essential role in economic, social, political, environmental, development and humanitarian fields, complementing the role of the State in providing services, reaching out to vulnerable and marginalised people, eradicating poverty, building resilience, and contributing to ensure that no one is left behind.
5. The Council further stresses the important role that CSOs play in promoting peaceful, just and inclusive societies including in fragile or conflict situations. It reaffirms the EU's strong commitment to an empowered and resilient civil society, in all its diversity, as a crucial component of any democracy in supporting good governance and the rule of law, as well as sustainable development, and in promoting human rights, gender equality, fundamental freedoms and democratic principles such as inclusion, transparency and accountability.
6. The Council remains deeply concerned by the shrinking space for civil society in an increasing number of countries. It is firmly opposed and will remain vigilant to unjustified restrictions to freedom of association, expression and peaceful assembly that are hindering the work of human rights organisations, women's organisations, pro-democracy actors and wider civil society movements. The Council calls upon the Commission to uphold and reinforce its support to enhance the enabling environment for civil society in partner countries and to protect the democratic space at all levels, from local to national, regional and global. The Council also calls on the EU to play an important role in promoting stronger positions on civic freedoms and against shrinking space, also in the UN frameworks, for increased accountability and in particular by giving high priority and visibility to Goal 16 of the Agenda 2030 and its targets relevant to democratic space.

7. The EU and its Member States will promote civil society space and enhance their support for building the capacity of CSOs to strengthen their voice in the development process and to advance political, social and economic dialogue. To this end, the Council stresses the need for the EU and its Member States to adopt sharper and more coherent approaches, including through strengthened context-specific analyses of the shrinking space at a strategy level, and to take concrete actions, and where appropriate joint actions, to protect and expand civil society space.
8. The Council stresses the need to strengthen efforts in mainstreaming gender equality, democracy and human rights in the EU's engagement with civil society in external relations. EU support should continue to ensure the protection of defenders of democracy and human rights, including organisations defending minority groups and all persons in vulnerable situations, organisations fighting against discrimination, including discrimination against LGBTI persons, as well as organisations fighting gender inequality or abuses of power. The Council insists on the need to further promote and enhance the role of women and girls as agents of change for the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies, including conflict prevention, mediation, peacebuilding and conflict recovery.
9. The Council notes the achievements in supporting civil society participation, in strengthening its capacity to operate and in defending an enabling environment including through political and policy dialogue with partner countries. The Council welcomes the increase of EU financial resources, since 2012, in support of CSOs through various instruments and programmes, and notes that the EU has become the top leading donor for local CSOs, including those active in humanitarian assistance and in protecting and promoting human rights and democracy.

10. The Council stresses the importance of ensuring the meaningful and structured participation of CSOs in dialogues on policies, budgets and aid priorities at country level. The Council welcomes to this end the elaboration of 105 EU Country Roadmaps translating the EU's commitment to strengthen civil society into local strategies, and calls for further concrete steps towards their implementation, underlining the need to ensure that they are framed and coordinated with other relevant policy documents, such as the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy and the EU Gender Action Plan.
11. The Council also underlines the importance of establishing the necessary operating space and mechanisms for civil society to engage in a political and policy dialogue with the EU. It welcomes in this regard the transformation of the Structured Dialogue with civil society into a permanent EU Policy Forum on Development and the participation of civil society in all of the EU's external instruments. The Council further welcomes the establishment of Framework Partnership Agreements (FPAs) with networks of CSOs as well as the positive impact that these long-term strategic partnerships can bring.
12. The Council underlines that Development Education and Awareness Raising (DEAR) can play an important part in supporting active engagement of people and for the realisation of the SDGs, thereby contributing to Global Citizenship and the promotion of global justice and respect for cultural diversity. The EU should maintain its leading role in supporting DEAR initiatives, including by continuing to promote a strategic approach to increase the level and quality of such initiatives as well as the capacity of CSOs and their networks in that regard. The Council also recognises the value and importance of volunteering as a form of active engagement of citizens.
13. The Council calls on the Commission to pursue and strengthen its engagement with civil society and to report back to Council by May 2019 at the latest. The Council invites the Commission to further reflect and report on the challenges encountered in partner countries as well as on the lessons learnt from countries where the engagement with civil society has been difficult due to internal factors, such as procedural bottlenecks, or to opposition by partner governments.