



19 September 2014

Ms Amina J. Mohammed
Special Advisor to the UN Secretary General on Post 2015 Development Planning
United Nations Headquarters
New York City, NY 10017

Subject: Response of the Civic Space Initiative to the July 2014 Proposal of the Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals

Dear Ms Mohammed,

We write to you as members of the [Civic Space Initiative](#), a global program jointly implemented by the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, ARTICLE 19, CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, and the World Movement for Democracy, who are committed to the creation of an enabling environment for civil society. The Civic Space Initiative implements activities in over eighty countries to advance a legal environment that enables all people to exercise the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and expression.

In April 2013, we made a joint [submission](#) on “Enabling Environment for Civil Society” to the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons. The submission highlighted cascading restrictions impeding the work of civil society actors around the globe and emphasized the centrality of civil society organisations (CSOs) to development. In relation to the Post 2015 sustainable development agenda, we urged the following:

- Inclusion of a target and indicator(s) to promote an enabling environment for civil society;
- Linking the target and indicator(s) to an analogue of MDG 8 in the post 2015 framework focusing on partnerships for development or to a new goal on good governance, human rights, or the enabling environment for development writ large; and
- Making an enabling environment for civil society a cross-cutting element across many goals.

We welcomed the High Level Panel report’s [recognition](#) that “citizens need a legal environment that enables them to form and join CSOs, [and] to protest and express opinions peacefully,” and that CSOs are vital partners in development and need an enabling legal environment to perform this role.

More recently, we were encouraged by the 19 July 2014 proposal of the Open Working Group (OWG) on Sustainable Development Goals, especially relating to Goal 16 on accountable and inclusive institutions and Goal 17 on revitalizing the global partnership. We were also pleased that the Introduction reiterates the Rio + 20 outcome’s reaffirmation of the importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as other international human rights instruments to sustainable development.

Like the High Level Panel, we firmly believe that participatory governance – of which an enabling environment for civil society is an essential element – is crucial for achieving *all* of the Sustainable Development Goals, whatever form they take.

Thus, we are deeply concerned that there is no explicit recognition of an “enabling environment for civil society” in the OWG’s proposal on Sustainable Development Goals and urge that the UN Secretary General’s synthesis report highlights this issue. In addition, we urge that the report reinforces the key role of civil society in development.

This is a key concern of civil society globally. The [Outcome Document](#) of the 65th UN-DPI/NGO conference, the most recent articulation of civil society’s demands for the post-2015 agenda, stresses the following:

“The fundamental freedoms of expression, media, association and assembly, reflecting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, underpin the ability of people to truly engage with the development agenda. These rights are the fundamental building blocks of good governance, empowering people to actively participate in achieving development goals and holding governments to account any successor framework must include commitments to protect freedom of association expression, assembly and political participation if it is to ensure an enabling environment for an empowered civil society.”

In more detail, we would urge the following issues to be highlighted in the stocktaking:

- **Human Rights.** We welcome a peace and governance goal that asserts protection of fundamental freedoms and assurance of inclusive and participatory decision-making. In particular, we feel the “fundamental freedoms” that underpin a robust and engaged civil society should be *explicitly mentioned* so that clear indicators for performance against progress can be formulated. These are the *freedoms of opinion and expression, information, association and peaceful assembly*. We also urge that these should be based on international human rights standards including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- **Partnerships.** We urge the specific recognition as set out in the OWG and HLP reports on importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships, especially civil society partnerships as the civil society sector has particular on-the-ground expertise and advantages. We however emphasise the need to unequivocally recognise the key role of civil society in the implementation of development strategies, as well as in ensuring accountability of various development actors. Specifically, we urge inclusion of stronger language on the centrality of civil society to sustainable development (as captured in the Busan Partnership for Economic Development and Cooperation, Section V of Millennium Declaration and the Rio +20 Outcome Document).
- **Protecting Civil Society.** We urge *clear mention* of the need to protect civil society actors, as their space is being undermined by a multitude of restrictions and threats in all regions of the globe. We also stress that the Introduction should clearly outline the importance of connecting environmental sustainability, human rights and anti-poverty agendas, while reiterating the importance of civil society participation in these processes.

In sum, we believe that final articulation of the Sustainable Development Goals need to include clear targets to protect civil and political rights, in particular the freedoms of opinion and expression, information, association, peaceful protest, and political participation, as well as guarantees of an enabling environment for civil society, including for human rights and environmental defenders.

We urge the UN Secretary General to consider these recommendations for his upcoming synthesis report. We thank you in advance for considering our concerns. We remain available to provide further clarifications and information if necessary.

Sincerely,

The *Civic Space Initiative* consortium: International Center for Not for Profit Law, ARTICLE 19, CIVICUS, and World Movement for Democracy

