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Strengthening Democracies to build back better: Challenges and Opportunities

Side Event:

Civil Society: Key to building stronger democracies post-pandemic
November 24, 2022; 13:30 – 14:30 CET
Room XXIII, United Nations Palais des Nations, Geneva

**Remarks by Ambassador Enrique Arturo de Obarrio,
General Coordinator of the Latin American and Caribbean Network for Democracy,
and Chairman of the International Steering Committee / Civil Society Pillar,
Community of Democracies**

The COVID-19 pandemic not only implied a crisis in the health systems of the whole world. It challenged us as humanity in our response capacities and resilience in an adverse scenario. Today, gathered here in person, it's hard to believe that over two years ago we were all locked down in our homes and, suddenly, we had to reconfigure our daily lives, and ideally reassess our priorities.

That is why, before moving on, let me once again thank all health professionals and the scientific community for their great and admirable efforts to look after our well-being, and for taking care of us, even risking their own lives. We literally owe them our lives. Thank you, thank you very much.

However, the coronavirus and its economic consequences, the worst since the depression of 1929, have not been the only crises we have faced. During this time, human rights and civic space were severely affected in almost every country. In Latin America, where I come from, most governments (regardless of their political origin) in some way violated the freedoms of citizens, which is an alarm for us as civil society, and makes us demand greater guarantees. While saving lives, the pandemic and the measures put into place to protect people from the virus also resulted in more than 115 million additional people suffering from extreme poverty some two years ago.

CIVICUS, the global network of which we are a part of, points out in its State of Civil Society Report published in May 2021 that “*One after the other, States adopted vertical and authoritarian approaches showing little trust in the wisdom of the people and communities. The first instinct of many presidents and prime ministers was to act as though the pandemic was a threat to their own power or authority, putting in place well-rehearsed repressive routines. Many States took on broad emergency powers, and some used the pandemic as a pretext to introduce restrictions to rights that will last long after the crisis has passed. At a time when exercising scrutiny over political leaders was more difficult, there prevailed the suspicion that some of them were opportunistically consolidating their power, rushing towards the adoption of repressive measures which they had long wanted to unleash*”.

Health crises or crises of any other type cannot be an excuse to place the Rule of Law and the Constitutions of our countries on hold, or act as if they did not exist. It’s precisely in those moments when we are most vulnerable and when we need our rights to be fully guaranteed.

We understand that governments faced very difficult decisions to save the lives of millions of people and also to save the economy, but it is essential that governments always think of us, the public and civil society, as allies. During this time thousands and thousands of social organizations have shown a tremendous capacity for adaptation and solidarity. We have the experience, the will and the empathy to also take care of ourselves as a community.

I bluntly tell you: Count on us during these difficult moments because democracy cannot be destroyed; it may be an imperfect system, but it is the best we have, and perfectible. I propose that the same way that as humanity we found the COVID vaccine, in record time, we also put our act together to find and agree on different ways to address the crises, in such a way that civic space is not also affected; that we put our act together to defend and fight for Democracy.

As civil society, we are not only the key to building stronger democracies, but we must also be the center of state and social action. We, the people, are the main agents for the transformation of our realities and, at the same time, we are the first to be affected when something doesn't work or goes wrong.

I am concerned that in the region where I come from, we are also in a political and democratic crisis. In almost all Latin American countries, human rights and the rule of law are in danger. Likewise, corruption is currently a major continental issue that has been recurring in various hemispheric and multilateral events from which no country escapes.

In this regard, as Redlad, we conceived and led a process in 2021 together with the Citizen Forum of the Americas we also established, and various chapters of Transparency International, named the Citizen Corruption Observatory, which followed up on 19 commitments signed by the States during the 2018 Summit of the Americas. I invite you to learn about this initiative and to consult the national, thematic and final reports that were presented in past months.

In a section of the regional balance published by the Observatory, it is stated very consciously that "*the regional trend points to a lack of progress, stagnation and, in several cases, weakening of anti-corruption measures, commensurate with the absence of spaces for participation and social control, as well as with the imbalance and concentration of power in the executive branch. These findings reinforce the findings highlighted in the Corruption Perceptions Index -CPI-. 18 (2020, a), of a region characterized by weak governance institutions, in which Covid-19 deepened the already existing social and economic inequalities affecting the most vulnerable populations (women, girls, indigenous people, Afro-Americans) and contributed to a democratic regression throughout the Americas*".

If democratic institutions were in a very poor situation before the pandemic, without a doubt we can recognize now that democracy is in a state of recession, we are losing the bout, and we must act together to reverse things; to help people understand that democracy in itself is not

the problem, but the lack of understanding and really applying all of those principles of a full Democracy, as stated more than two decades ago in the Warsaw Declaration. And we must also recognize not only that civil society plays a major role in all aspects of democratic governance and should be always seen as an ally but, most importantly, emphasize on the importance of constructive dialogue.

Considering the above, and based on our experience, it is essential that the strengthening of democracies in post-pandemic times focus on three aspects, among others:

1. Consider people as central and fundamental subjects of any political, social, economic and cultural project and of all the actions that the State carries out, in such a way that in times of crisis the civic space finds innovative ways to reconfigure itself. That is why we must not only be central in decision-making but also allies. At the same time, we must all strive to strengthen our democratic culture and fill any gap of citizenship deficit; people need to get much more involved, and exercise their rights but also their obligations; for instance voting right, following their conscious, when exercising the right to vote;
2. The fight against corruption must have several levels of co-responsibility since it has an impact on the lives of all people. Therefore, combining efforts between the public and private sectors, academia and civil society organizations is essential. The cancer of corruption is clearly destroying the very moral fabric of our nations, it has metastasized, and all sectors of every country's social mosaic must have a firm stance against this disease, conducive to its eradication, and
3. Finally, we at Redlad -and this is something for which we will be working very hard from the Civil Society Pillar within the Community of Democracies-, have been working on a **new way**, what we are convinced will be a game changing **right way** to find effective and sustainable solutions to our country's, our region's and the world's most pressing issues. I am referring to a new, evolved form of never seeing before **inter sector constructive dialogue, on a level playing field, with a common agenda, between governments /**

political sector, civil society, private sector, workers / unions, and academia; first reaching an agreement to build consensus based on a shared vision, resulting in a renewed social contract, with the right and also unanimously agreed upon follow up, monitoring and execution mechanism.

This is the true right way to learn from the crisis, come out of it strengthened; to really learn the right lessons from such historic experience, prioritize, and build back better, with the necessary socio political and economic changes / adjustments / corrections, in a sustainable fashion, therefore consolidating our capacity of resiliency in preparation or as a preventive measure to be better prepared for future crisis.