

**COMMUNITY OF DEMOCRACIES**  
**WORKSHOP ON BUILDING THE RESILIENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY**  
**June 27, 2023, Geneva**

## **SUMMARY**

Governing Council members of the Community of Democracies (CoD) and civil society colleagues were invited to attend the third workshop organized by Canada in its capacity as President of the Governing Council. The event was co-sponsored by the International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law and consisted of a panel discussion on “Building the Resilience of Civil Society.” Following in-person opening remarks from Canada and virtual remarks from the U.S., the panelists discussed the proliferation of restrictions to the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, civic spaces, and civic freedoms. Panelists also discussed strategies for empowering local civil society organizations to navigate context-specific challenges and the need for greater resilience among governments and civil society organizations (CSO) to address these issues.

### **Key takeaways for CoD members:**

- A strategic approach to creating a safe and enabling environment for CSOs is one that prioritizes local CSOs and acknowledges that those affected by restrictive policies should lead the changes related to their circumstances.
- Empowering CSOs to shape and navigate the legal environment is an important first step toward building their resilience. This includes training them to navigate the online information environment and to leverage international mechanisms to hold governments accountable for restrictive practices.
- CSOs and governments need to promote more positive narratives about the importance of civic spaces and the work of civil society organizations for producing tangible benefits to societies.

### **Panelists:**

1. **David Moore**, Vice President at the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL).
2. **Clément Voule**, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association.
3. **Gina Romero**, Executive Director at the Latin American and Caribbean Network for Democracy (REDLAD).
4. **Sigrid Lipott**, United Nations Advisor at CIVICUS.

### **Key Remarks:**

1. **Amélie Goudreau**, Acting Counsellor at the Permanent Mission of Canada in Geneva.
2. **Allison Peters**, Deputy Assistant Secretary at the U.S. Department of State.
3. **Thomas Garrett**, Secretary General of the Community of Democracies.

## **DISCUSSION**

The panelists had the opportunity to answer and discuss three main reflection questions. The experts presented the following key takeaways:

**Question 1: We are seeing a rise in authoritarianism globally. How are CSOs adapting to mitigate the risks associated with operating in regions under authoritarian influence and/or with increasing restrictions?**

- CSOs are influencing the legal environment and through these efforts have been successful in pushing back against repressive draft laws. These responses include conventional means, such as mass protests, and new approaches, like crowdfunding, to ensure their sustained activities in the face of restrictions.
- CSOs are leveraging international mechanisms provided by UN Special Rapporteurs, the CoD Working Group for Enabling and Protecting Civil Society, and other international mechanisms, such as the Open Government Partnership, Financial Action Task Force, and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, to pressure governments to withdraw restrictive draft laws or enact enabling measures.
- CSOs view the digital ecosystem and social media as more than a tool for sharing stories about victims of human rights violations and are leveraging these to understand how their messages are received and to evaluate their strategic communications.

**Question 2: How can governments and international CSOs collaborate to support local CSOs to push back against and navigate context-specific challenges?**

- Support for CSOs against restrictions on civic space and civic freedoms should consider the historical context driving their escalation and why these restrictions persist.
- Governments and international civil society organizations (ICOs) need to build on the momentum created by local CSOs shaping the legal environment. This can be achieved by training them about the legal environment and how to operate within its parameters to build their effectiveness and reduce vulnerabilities.
- Governments and ICOs can also connect regional lawyer networks with their local counterparts to provide training on international law, thereby strengthening legal services for CSOs facing restrictions.
- Training should also empower CSOs to be resilient to changes in the information environment, counter restrictions with pro-civil society narratives, and engage with government regulators on the use of digital technologies.

**Question 3: What can CoD member countries do to coordinate or support activities, including multilaterally, to address the rising targeting of CSOs?**

- Support for CSOs to push back against restrictions should follow the “three P’s” (promotion, participation, protection). These entail promoting global norms that safeguard civic spaces, facilitating the participation of CSOs in inclusive dialogue with their government counterparts, and expanding protection for civic activists and CSOs in exile.
- CoD members can promote dialogue with civil society and continue to develop a common agenda for ensuring the protection and promotion of civil society organizations and civic spaces.
- CoD members can also echo the efforts made by their civil society counterparts to change the narrative about CSOs and promote positive messages about their work and success stories where CSOs have expanded civic spaces or prevented restrictive practices.