**Civic Space Cohort**

**Informal Meeting Notes: December 5, 2022**

**Co-Lead Points**

* The aim of the meeting is to inform about the cohort process, how the cohort leaders identified workstream topics, and to solicit input and reflections on how we can work together.
* Civic space and civil society are crucial to democracy – no one can doubt the importance of these topics. At the same time, the Cohort needs to be practical and limit the scope of this work. Accordingly, cohort leaders decided to identify workstreams on topics where one country can together with civil society.
* The working model is to identify recommendations that participants in the cohort can support, and which will be presented at the 2nd Summit for Democracy for further support from governments (for example, as commitments).
* 6 Thematic Workstreams:
	1. Participation of civil society and national human rights institutions in public decision-making processes at the national level (led by Norway);
	2. A Safe and enabling environment for social movements (yet to be confirmed, but the US has showed interest in this workstream);
	3. Support to civil society in exile; (Czech Republic is leading)
	4. 25th anniversary of the UN Declaration on human rights defenders (led by Norway);
	5. Civil society participation in the UN (UK has signaled interest in leading);
	6. OECD DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance (led by Norway).
* The aim is to have 1-3 recommendations per workstream. We want to signal that the number of recommendations should be limited. The risk with having too many, or for them to be too broad, is that it would not be easy to follow-up.
* In regards to civil society in exile:
	+ There are many different topics that we could focus our work on, and we will have to narrow down our recommendations for commitments (i.e. visa and consular issues, personal security, conditions to allow for activists/journalists/defenders to continue their work, etc.).
* Have not had a meeting of this cohort workstream yet – will likely meet in early January. In advance of the meeting, workstream leads are working on streamlining topicsA
* There is limited bandwidth and time before the next Summit in March. Nonetheless, there is an opportunity to move the civic space agenda forward. We need input from civil society: How can we realistically advance the cohort’s agenda between now and the next Summit?

**Reactions, comments and questions from civil society**

* *What analyses have the cohort leads made of the commitments made in the actions plans at the first Summit related to civic space, and to what extent are the 6 workstreams being designed around those commitments to ensure follow-though? In other words, what is the thread between Summit 1 and Summit 2?*
	+ Started by reviewing a collection compiled by ICNL on all commitments made relating to civic space. Then looked at main topics that would benefit from further focus/visibility and were not already encompassed by other cohorts. Of course, the cohort could have chosen many more than 6 topics, but we needed to limit due to limited capacity and finding governments willing to engage.
	+ It is also important to show that we have to work on civil society in a national context as well – to defend democracy at home – which is why we have focused on the national level, exile, and global themes.
* *How will the workstreams function; what opportunities will there be for civil society to be involved in them?*
	+ This is the launch meeting, so we are coming to civil society early for ideas. The current concept is to focus participation after this meeting at the workstream level.
	+ The Accountability Lab [newsletter](https://mailchi.mp/accountabilitylab/s4ddec2022?e=b74677b787) links to two concept papers (for two of the workstreams). We anticipate that each workstream will prepare a concept paper, which will be shared with civil society, and then there will be opportunities for civil society to engage.
* *The UN Special Rapporteur on Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights office welcomes any opportunity to engage with/reinforce the 6 workstreams, especially the workstream on participation within the UN system. In terms of output, what information will be made publicly available, in addition to the concept notes and the eventual identified recommendations?*
	+ The co-leads are still learning about the expectation from the Summit organizers in terms of output. We are not yet sure how the joint recommendations will be presented, but we do not envision producing a large amount of documentation or supporting material for summit organizers or the public.
	+ We do not have a separate secretariat to collect/prepare documentation for all of the different recommendations, but if it’s possible to share reports, docs, etc. that can help other countries agree to support, it may be possible to make those available. We haven’t yet discussed this internally, and it has to be manageable in terms of resources/capacity.
* *During the workstream development, did you also discuss the strategy of authoritarian regimes to introduce delegitimizing legislation (for example, Foreign Agent laws), to portray human rights orgs as enemies of the state?*
	+ This touches on several workstreams, and we will take this comment into account when we draft recommendations. There are also other cohorts, particularly one on resisting authorization pressure (led by Lithuania) that may delve into this topic more.
	+ ICNL has a workstream on Foreign Agent Laws, if anyone is interested in restrictive legislation, please follow up with ICNL bilaterally.
* *To what extent are you involving education actors in this work? Each workstream should consider what role education institutions can play in strengthening civil society participation and democracy, as involvement of education is particularly relevant for safe and enabling environment for social movements.*
	+ The point of civic education is key – how to have an informed public to exercise civic freedoms. Will take this comment into account, perhaps specifically for the social movement workstream.
	+ The OECD DAC recommendation under pillar two (principle 8) on supporting and engaging with civil society covers the issue of education.
* *In post-election environments, the space for following up on pledges and engaging in policymaking process often closes. Another issue is that many consultative processes have been shut down post-MDGs, including interface capacity building. Need to improve interface capacity building – from an African perspective, many government officials do not know how to engage with civil society. Deliberative processes are also missing – for civil society to come together and determine priorities.*
	+ This point will be taken under advisement.
* *What is the thinking around recommendation implementation? There are many recommendations out there that relate to civic space – how do we get states to monitor and implement? How is this process designed to encourage states to get behind the recommendations with a process that continues on?*
	+ We only have two Summit meetings, and as far as we understand, no plans for a third. The US has said that it would like to use the Community of Democracies (CoD) to follow up with the recommendations. Again, we have no specific secretariat, so recommendations need to be fed into other processes (like CoD, OGP, OECD). The Summit should be used for increased knowledge, awareness, and joint ownership.
	+ These other initiatives (CoD, OGP, OECD, and so on) will outlast the Summit for Democracy. We encourage civil society to share other ideas within these existing initiatives, to integrate our priorities.
	+ Redlad is the chair and secretariat of the civil society pillar of the Community of Democracies, and would like to coordinate action, as the CoD also has a working group on civil society.
* *Can you elaborate on the workstream on the 25th anniversary of the UN declaration on human rights defenders?*
	+ The purpose is to use the Summit to increase the visibility of the work of HRDs, but to also contribute to a narrative shift – to frame what HRDs have achieved.
	+ Goal is to find some commitments that can be readily and practically implemented.
* *Will there be a contact point for each workstream? What is the next step for each workstream?*
	+ Yes, this is a good way for discussion and for civil society to provide further input. Please check regularly with the Accountability Lab website – we will provide the contacts as we develop the different workstreams.

**Next steps**

* Thank you to all for joining on short notice. Further participation and engagement with the cohort will be channeled directly through the different workstreams. The cohort co-leads will share additional information with participants and will possibly hold an additional meeting with a wider civil society group before March.