

15 March 2022

Amb. Abdulla Shahid

President of the General Assembly

United Nations

Re: Closing Space for Civil Society: A Call for meaningful participation of all relevant stakeholders in the entire IMRF

Dear Excellency Amb. Shahid,

We hope this letter finds you well. We, the undersigned civil society coalitions and organizations¹ are reaching out today to express our concerns on the shrinking space for full, meaningful, self-organized civil society representation and participation in the United Nations in general, and more specifically in the upcoming International Migration Review Forum (IMRF).

Over the past few years, we have witnessed increasing instances of systemic exclusion of civil society from the United Nations. While COVID-19 has been cited as an explanation for such exclusion², many of these practices pre-date the pandemic. This poses a threat to democracy³, and as was raised by over 60 UN Member States, it also undermines the UN's "*collective responsibility to respect, protect and promote the freedom to engage with the UN as an exercise of fundamental freedoms and human rights for all*"⁴.

While the first IMRF represents a crucial opportunity to ensure that an effective, inclusive and rights-respecting process to evaluate the implementation of *the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration* (GCM) is solidified, we are concerned that it will fail to **meaningfully** include migrant and civil society voices.

As migrant and other civil society organizations – in most cases, groups that have consistently engaged in the entire process of the GCM, from the 2016 UN High Level Summit on Refugees and Migrants through the 2018 Marrakech Conference, and in these first years of implementation of the GCM, we are alarmed at the complete exclusion of all stakeholders from participating in person in the Secretary-General's Report briefing event during Migration Week, and from the upcoming negotiations of the Progress Declaration. Neither the parallel consultations with stakeholders only⁵,

¹ See the list of current endorsers as of today at the end of this letter. Additional endorsements beyond today will continue to be added [online here](#).

² We welcome the phased reopening of, and civil society access to UNHQ this week, with the hope that this will continue for the entire IMRF.

³ In its report [Civic Space on a Downward Spiral](#), Civicus denotes that the number of people living in countries with serious civic space restrictions has increased, as 87% of the world's population now lives in countries rated as closed, repressed or obstructed.

⁴ [Joint Statement](#) led by Costa Rica and Denmark, and supported by [61 Member States](#), to denounce the shrinking civic space at the United Nations, June 2021.

⁵ Such as the recent Co-facilitators' townhall with stakeholders on the IMRF Progress Declaration, the next townhall on 20 April after the Progress Declaration has been mostly finalized, and the consultation you will be convening tomorrow on the Multi-stakeholder Hearing.

nor the opportunity to provide written input via the discussion space in the Migration Hub⁶, can replace the critical in-the-room, in-person presence, participation, and active dialogue of civil society with Member States and other stakeholders during both the negotiations for the Progress Declaration and the IMRF itself.

When migrants and migrant-allied groups are unable to be in the room to speak in our own collective interests, migration policies suffer from a lack of key stakeholder knowledge and input, resulting in inaccurate evaluation, and potentially ill-founded and exclusionary implementation efforts moving forward. If transposed to the IMRF, this would risk amplifying a critical omission in the GCM itself: the lack of clear focus on the promotion and protection of civic freedoms⁷ for migrants and the civil society groups that provide services or platforms for their voices.⁸

Intentionally hindering the active and self-organized participation of the most affected stakeholders in the IMRF itself would result in the Forum and Progress Declaration offering only a partial accounting of the GCM's progress and challenges. This will undermine the GCM's whole-of-society guiding principle,⁹ and the relevance of the GCM itself.

Our request for full access

Therefore, we ask to be accorded a meaningful space during the IMRF this coming May, as repeatedly called for by Member States¹⁰, and are requesting the following:

- Both in-person **access to the negotiating meeting room** at UNHQ, and live streaming, **during Member State consultations** (28 March, 7 April, 18 April) on the Progress Declaration. This was the practice during negotiations for both the 2016 New York Declaration and the 2018 GCM.

⁶ Some organizations are still awaiting a response to their registration request for the discussion space, several days after requesting it.

⁷ As detailed in a 2020 report ([A/HRC/44/42](#)) by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, migrants' ability to exercise their civic freedoms is increasingly under threat around the world, as they face both legal and practical barriers to the exercise of their rights to free association, assembly and expression. Likewise, migrant-allied groups have found themselves increasingly constrained in their operations, including by targeted legal restrictions that may prevent them from registering as non-governmental organizations. And there are also documented increased harassment, arrests, and attacks on human rights defenders by states.

⁸ Since migrant-allied groups, including migrant worker organizations, are often without domestic legal registration or support from their governments, they are not only hindered in their efforts to advance GCM objectives through their work, but also prohibited from gaining the special accreditation needed to participate in multilateral fora, such as the IMRF.

⁹ As set forth in paragraph 15, section (j) of the GCM, *"The Global Compact promotes broad multi-stakeholder partnerships to address migration in all its dimensions by including migrants, diasporas, local communities, civil society, academia, the private sector, parliamentarians, trade unions, National Human Rights Institutions, the media and other relevant stakeholders in migration governance."* This is further reinforced in paragraph 44, where Member States commit to *"...implement the Global Compact in cooperation with migrants, civil society, migrant and diaspora organizations, faith-based organizations, local authorities and communities, the private sector, trade unions... and other relevant stakeholders."*

¹⁰ Specifically pertaining to reviewing progress in achieving the GCM, in paragraph 49(d), Member States pledged that the IMRF will *"...allow for interaction with other relevant stakeholders..."*. In support of this, a year later, paragraph 4 of the IMRF's modalities resolution *"reiterates the importance of the effective participation of all relevant stakeholders..."*.

- Both **in-person and virtual meetings by Co-facilitators with civil society and other stakeholders** immediately **prior to or during each of the negotiating sessions** to provide direct, in-the-moment input. This was the practice throughout negotiations of the GCM. Currently the only scheduled meeting with Co-facilitators is on 20 April, after the negotiations are largely completed.
- **Full participation in the entire IMRF** (as clearly detailed in paragraph 24(a) of the IMRF's Modalities Resolution), not just the Multi-stakeholder Hearing, in the meeting room itself, not an overflow room, with the same modalities that will apply to Member States.
- Beyond designated civil society roundtable speakers, **active in-room opportunities for multiple civil society delegates** to interact with Member States and other stakeholders in each of the four roundtables.
- An **equal number of delegates** per accredited stakeholder organization, **including in-room presence**, as will be accorded to Member States' delegations.

In future IMRFs (and other UN spaces) we call for:

- Modalities that enable civil society and other stakeholders to **self-organize our engagement** in the IMRF and to designate civil society leadership in a democratic and transparent way.
- The **removal of the non-objection clause** regarding civil society and other stakeholders' accreditation from the modalities.
- The **removal of the requirement of registration in a country** in order to apply for accreditation as it ignores national realities of closing space for migrants and the organizations that represent them in exercising their civic rights.
- Reliable and sufficient quality **interpretation in all official UN languages** during all events, and dedicated **funding to support the participation of grassroots civil society** members and other stakeholders.

Only such inclusive modalities will allow civil society to fully participate in a representative and meaningful manner in the IMRF, intended to be inclusive, open and transparent, as the Co-facilitators emphasized. These measures, which are consistent with the GCM's consultation, stocktaking, and negotiations phases (2017-2018), as well as the Marrakech Conference (2018), will be critical for a real whole-of-society approach and a truly successful International Migration Review Forum that advances achievement of both the Global Compact for Migration and the Sustainable Development Goals.

We look forward to engaging actively in your upcoming consultation tomorrow, and to the opportunity to further dialogue on these pressing and urgent concerns.

List of Endorsers

- Africa-Europe Diaspora Development Platform (ADEPT)
- Asylum Access
- Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI)
- Civil Society Action Committee (AC)
- Education International (EI)
- Global Coalition on Migration
- International Detention Coalition (IDC)
- International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF)
- International Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers (IFS)
- Lutheran World Federation
- Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA)
- Migration Youth and Children Platform (MYCP)
- National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights
- NGO Committee on Migration (NGO CoM)
- Pacific Women Indigenous Network (PacificWIN) and the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (PIANGO)
- Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM)
- Public Services International (PSI)
- Scalabrini International Migration Network (SIMN)
- Women in Migration Network (WIMN)

A list of additional endorsements beyond today will continue to be regularly updated [online here](#).