

Making NGOs' voices heard at the UN

We can't overestimate, I think, the powerful role in civil society can and does play in protecting and promoting human rights, democratic values and holding those in power to account. Our work here at the UN and across the globe would not be as effective without the contribution of civil society organisations. Individuals across the world look to civil society to help make their lives better and fairer.

And that's why, as the United Kingdom, we are committed to championing civil society globally, including across the work the UN. In November, during our presidency of the Security Council, we intentionally put people at the heart of our work. In line with that focus, we invited a number of members of civil society to participate in briefings. We produced, Mr Chairman, a booklet of the most compelling of those briefings, called 'Security Council Voices'. And if any colleague would like a copy, they are very welcome to contact the UK Mission. We value the important contributions of NGOs in the UN's work, and that's why we're pleased to announce the UK's candidacy for the NGO Committee last October during Third Committee. We will champion civil society at every opportunity.

Sadly, and as we have heard here at the UN, we do not always give civil society the platform they deserve to inform, discuss and debate across the UN agenda. The Committee is considering 360 NGO applications that it already has a backlog of 272 deferred applications. This state of affairs can't continue. The Committee's role is to facilitate access, not impede it through bureaucracy. We believe the committee should take action to ensure the backlog is dealt with quickly and fairly and that NGOs have the opportunity to address any concerns the committee might have before a decision is reached.

The NGO Committee knows well that many civil society organisations operate in challenging environments where their ability to work is blocked or restricted. We need to work together to ensure that the UN does not ever fall into that category. This committee is at the heart of making the UN a safe and welcoming environment and all of us have a part to play in making that a reality.

As UN member states, we can benefit from NGOs' experience and unique viewpoint on issues, common interests. We all said this in 2018 when this committee held the first ever consultations with civil society. We believe it's a shame that we did not hold such consultations last year and we do hope the committee might reinstate them this year.

In 2019, the United Kingdom publicly highlighted the support we give to human rights defenders across the world. We published a document called 'UK Support for Human Rights Defenders', making it publicly available online in all six official UN languages to ensure the widest reach. At the past session of Third Committee, we led on joint statement on reprisals on behalf of 71 member states. We were greatly encouraged by the statement's strong cross-

regional support, demonstrating wide recognition of the vital role human rights defenders play in advancing all of our rights and freedoms. We ask all members here and the Committee to publicly welcome and support their work.

In ending, I would like to urge the Committee to do three things. Firstly, to resolve the many deferred applications fairly and transparently. Secondly, to announce a date for the next consultation meeting with NGOs. And thirdly, to promote a safe and welcoming space for civil society to voice their views. All three of these things are important and achievable, and we hope 2020 will be the year that the Committee recognises the importance of civil society to the UN and to people around the globe who struggle to enjoy the full range of their human rights.

Thank you.