

# SOLIDARITY STATEMENT

## **“Closing Space for Civil Society and Media in East Africa: Forging a Collaborative Response”**

*23 February 2018 (Nairobi, Kenya)*

We, more than 60 civil society organisation and media representatives from Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda working on human rights, democratic development, transparency, digital media, women and youth empowerment, legal aid, litigation and other issues of public interest are gathered in Nairobi to express our firm resolve to stand together in solidarity as civil society and media.

We will remain vigilant against threats to civic space. We commit to collaborate and provide support to each other through individual and joint efforts at the national and regional levels to combat shrinking space.

We note with concern a trend of closing civic space in the three East African countries characterized by increasing impunity. This has been evidenced by repressive tactics perpetrated by state and non-state actors, including among others:

- Intimidation of and reprisals against journalists and activists through smear campaigns, arrests, detention and disappearances;
- Enactment of restrictive laws and policies;
- Disregard for the rule of law such as the continued failure in Kenya to operationalize the PBO Act despite several court orders;
- Constraining financing of civil society organisations and media;
- Curtailment of civil society’s and media’s freedom of movement and ability to freely operate especially in electoral contexts;
- Restrictions on access to information through banning of newspapers and shutting down of media outlets and civil society organisations as has happened in Tanzania;
- Surveillance of activists and journalists in physical and digital spaces;
- Criminalization of dissent;
- Use of excessive force to disperse peaceful protests and demonstrations;
- intimidation of the judiciary and other governance and oversight institutions that should be independent; and
- Harassment of civil society organisations by raids, break-ins, confiscation of documents and equipment as has been experienced in Uganda.

We are cognizant that shrinking civic space is not unique to the region but is contextualised by the decline in democratic ideals globally. Governments seem to adopt repressive tactics from each other and use similar justifications to shrink civic space including national security prerogatives and promotion of accountability within the media and civil society sectors.

Further, as civic space advocates, we note that a repressed civic environment adversely affects not only civil society organisations, the media and ultimately other sectors, but also the ordinary citizen, and leads to cultural, economic, political and social decline of a society.

As a coalition, we have identified areas in which joint interventions are necessary and have developed regional strategies and interventions to maintain and claim civic space. We resolve:

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- To take joint actions to build mutual understanding and ongoing dialogue between media and civil society;
- To engage in regional advocacy;
- To strengthen protective mechanisms, including litigation and legal aid;
- To develop innovative funding and revenue streams;
- To increase the use and protection of digital space;
- To enhance civil society and media accountability internally and within the political context;
- To work towards redefining narratives and public perceptions of the sector; and
- To mobilize academia in order to leverage knowledge and research outputs.

At the national level, we identified several initiatives to enhance civil society organisations and media cooperation including establishing ongoing dialogue platforms, developing joint capacity building initiatives, building trust, addressing mutual security concerns online and offline, and mitigating risks.

We will engage with other actors including academia, professional associations, young people, and state institutions, to cultivate a broader understanding and appreciation of the role of civil society and media in a democratic society.

We pledge to continue collaborating towards ensuring a safe and enabling space for civil society and media in East Africa.

#CivicSpaceEastAfrica

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The civil society and media leaders were convened for a two- day strategic workshop hosted by the Civil Society Reference Group, a Kenyan coalition whose role is to protect and enhance an independent and effective civil society voice and agency for public benefit, and the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), a US-based organisation that has provided technical expertise on laws that govern civil society in over 100 countries worldwide and more than 20 in Africa.