

43rd Session of the UN Human Rights Council
Item 8 General Debate – Joint Statement
Action Canada for Population and Development
16 June 2020

Thank you President,

Action Canada makes this statement on behalf of the Sexual Rights Initiative, the Center for Reproductive Rights, RFSU (Swedish Association for Sexuality Education), Rutgers, CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, the Association for Progressive Communications, Plan International, the International Planned Parenthood Federation, the Association for Women's Rights in Development, MenEngage Alliance, the International Service for Human Rights and the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW).

The Vienna Declaration recognised the important role of non-governmental organisations in the promotion of all human rights at national, regional and international levels. Rights holders are recognised not only as beneficiaries of human rights programs and services but as agents who have a right to participate in the development of the same.

Madam President, we are facing unprecedented global and national crises - militarism, dictatorships, poverty and inequality, forced migration and displacement, mass incarceration, police brutality, occupation, mass extinction and climate destruction. The most recent health pandemic to be added to this list of crises, COVID-19, has had disproportionate impact on people of colour, people living in poverty, people who already had barriers in accessing health services, and other people facing multiple and intersecting oppressions. Unfortunately, too many states have failed to apply a human rights-based approach in their responses to COVID-19. Instead, states have used the pandemic to further restrict human rights and fundamental freedoms. Across the globe, crackdowns on human rights defenders, political dissent and restrictions on the right to freedom of speech, peaceful assembly have been reported. Laws and policies that undermine or roll back human rights have been tabled and passed by states that take advantage of the health fears and restrictions.

The Human Rights Council, the only multi-lateral space tasked exclusively with the promotion, protection and fulfilment of human rights, has a critical role to play in addressing these human rights crises. But it can only do this with the robust engagement of civil society in all the areas of its work. Civil society organisations provide information about human rights conditions that would otherwise not be presented by states or by expert bodies and mechanisms. They offer in-depth technical knowledge in identifying and detailing human rights violations and concerns and are also able to propose remedies and redress. Finally, civil society plays a key role in ensuring accountability for implementation of human rights standards and commitments at the national level.

Many civil society organisations have already drawn attention to the barriers to participation in the sessions of the Human Rights Council and the UN in general. Visa conditions, the high cost of getting to and staying in Geneva, travel bans and reprisals when returning to their home country are just a few of the obstacles that confront human rights defenders, particularly those coming from the Global South. While far from ideal, CSOs have developed

strategies to mitigate some of these and found ways to nevertheless ensure representation and participation.

While we acknowledge the necessary health measures that need to be applied in these times of pandemic, we would like to reiterate and stress the crucial importance of CSOs, including and especially of CSOs not based in Geneva, to the proceedings of the Council and warn against the instrumentalization of the crisis to further restrict civil society space. Issues such as delays in sharing information. The confusion on the modalities, the time frame and even the days and venues of meetings have a disproportionate impact on CSO's not in Geneva giving them limited time to prepare and engage meaningfully.

We must defend, and even expand, civil society participation and engagement in the Human Rights Council sessions and its work as fundamental to ensuring that states respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of all and fundamental freedoms for all. Nothing about us without us!