

Press Statement: Defending the Vital Role of Civil Society Organizations in Kenya

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For decades, Civil Society Organizations in Kenya have been the backbone of our nation, tirelessly safeguarding democratic values and principles, amplifying the voices of vulnerable communities, promoting transparency and accountability, and ensuring the rights of all Kenyans are upheld. Their contributions have been instrumental in our nation's growth and stability, and their efforts have consistently upheld the principles of justice and democracy.

In the last three months, civil society and the media have engaged robustly in pushing for public finance management accountability, including public debt, protection of human rights, especially freedom of expression and the right to assemble, including protest, active citizenship, end of extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, abductions, and even theft of public resources.

Kenyans share these concerns and are now pushing for an accountable government at all levels, especially the executive and legislative arms. The continued neglect of the need for an accountable and transparent government that respects and values the voices of the people of Kenya is the reason for the continued protests across several parts of the country.

Against this background, we are deeply concerned by the recent letter from the Government of Kenya implying that CSOs fund and support unlawful behaviour and unruly protests, which starkly contradict our work. We categorically repudiate these unfounded accusations and reiterate our call for the government to remain true to the constitution and protect independent civil society organisations and media in Kenya. CSOs have been instrumental in Kenya's development and play a pivotal role in protecting human rights, upholding the rule of law, promoting good governance and fostering social and economic progress.

We unequivocally condemn any unlawful acts during protests. The allegations that CSOs are complicit in promoting illegal activities are false and undermine the invaluable work they do to strengthen our society and are aimed at tarnishing the perception of CSOs to the citizenry we serve. In recent months, CSOs have risen to initiate rapid response interventions to meet the pressing and overwhelming needs and concerns of Kenyans affected by the crisis through providing legal aid for those arrested or abducted, medical assistance for those injured, and psychosocial support for individuals and families affected. Furthermore, they have continued to amplify advocacy on the human rights and governance concerns presented by Kenyans. These actions, which CSOs have championed over a long period, should not be misconstrued as support for the acts of lawlessness and violence meted against Kenyans and which CSOs have consistently called out all through the protests.

The suggestion that young people, particularly the GenZ, are being funded to speak up and use their voices devalues their genuine contributions to Kenya's development. Young Kenyans have shown remarkable dedication and initiative in advocating for positive change. Their voices are not just essential but inspiring in shaping the future of our nation, and they deserve to be heard and respected.

We are alarmed by the unprecedented violent crackdowns, abductions and disappearances of Kenyans who have expressed concern over the state of governance and human rights in Kenya. We see the CSOs as an extension of the ongoing general repression against civic space and human rights defenders. In recent weeks, prominent human rights organisations in the country have been subjected to an increase in acts of intimidation, harassment, and threats by the authorities, as well as threats against partners that fund their human rights work. These attacks and threats have also been unleashed upon the media and individual journalists.

We call upon the government and all stakeholders to protect the Kenyan civic space. CSOs must be allowed to operate without undue interference or baseless accusations. The constitution of Kenya guarantees the right to peaceful protest and freedom of expression. These rights must be protected and honoured, not only for CSOs but for every Kenyan.

We reiterate the calls from young people and other advocates for the Constitution of Kenya to be followed to the letter. Unlawful actions by goons, police, and other state agents must cease immediately. We demand strict accountability in the budget-making process, the thorough constitutional audit of public debt that has impeded service delivery, and the interdiction and prosecution of all people accused of corruption and theft of public money. The rule of law is paramount, and all parties must be accountable for their actions.

In conclusion, we reaffirm our unwavering commitment to supporting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. We stand in solidarity with the civil society organizations that continue to champion these values, and we urge the government to recognize and respect their indispensable role in our nation's progress. In closing, we continue that Kenyans stay woke and continue their role as active Citizens as the people with direct power on the affairs of the Kenyan state and, in turn, call on the government to keep all channels for direct participation of the people open even when they are cause discomfort to those in authority.

Name the Organizations

1. Action Aid International Kenya
2. Africa Centre for Open Governance (AFRICOOG)
3. African Forum for Debt and Development (AFRODAD)
4. Amnesty International Kenya
5. Article 19 Eastern Africa
6. Badili Africa
7. Bajeti Hub
8. Centre for Enhancing Democracy and Good Governance
9. Centre for Rights Education and Awareness (CREAW)
10. CRAWN Trust
11. Civic Freedoms Forum (CFF)

12. Christian Aid International Kenya
13. Coalition for Grassroots Human Rights Defenders
14. Coalition on Violence Against Women
15. Community Aid International
16. Democracy without Borders - Kenya
17. Emerging Leaders Foundation
18. End Femicide-KE Movement
19. Feminists in Kenya
20. Federation for Women Lawyers Kenya (FIDA Kenya)
21. Greenstrings Network
22. Human Rights Watch
23. Hummingbird Grassroots Centre
24. Initiative for Equality and Non-Discrimination
25. International Commission of Jurists Kenya
26. International Medical Legal Unit
27. Inuka Kenya Ni Sisi!
28. Institute for Public Finance Kenya
29. Kenya Human Rights Commission
30. Law Society of Kenya
31. Mzalendo Trust
32. National Coalition for Human Rights Defenders
33. NAWI Collective
34. Open Institute
35. Pathway Policy Institute
36. Resource Centre for Women and Girls
37. Siasa Place
38. SDG Forum Kenya
39. Shield for Justice
40. The Institute for Social Accountability
41. Transparency International Kenya
42. Tribeless Youth
43. Trust Africa
44. Victims of Violence Support Africa