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Overhaul laws restricting civil society organisations, say development groups

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A climate of fear and heavy-handedness overshadows the work environment of many organisations that promote democracy, human rights and development, a study has found ahead of a United Nations hearing on human rights.

The study by development organisations, ACT Alliance and CIDSE says staff of civil society organisations in many countries are afraid to do their work and face harassment, censorship and unfair legislation. Those that are critical of government come up for special attention.

Space for Civil Society – How to Protect and Expand an Enabling Environment¹ will be presented at the 25th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva on March 13. Using the examples of Malawi, Rwanda, Colombia and Zimbabwe between 2009 and 2013, the study shows many people working for civil society organisations in those countries feel fear some or all the time. In three out of the four countries studied, it had become harder to peacefully assemble or to take part in political processes.

Legislation controlling the work of civil society organisations has become increasingly repressive, seriously hampering the degree to which organisations can carry out their mandate. CIDSE and ACT want oppressive governments to amend laws restricting civil society organisations, ensuring those groups enjoy the independence, participation and freedom to which they are entitled.

“Many governments fail to protect civil society organisations and neglect to involve them in the design and planning of development projects,” says Julian Waagensen, representing the CIDSE network. “This is a worrying trend, since the ability of communities to lead their own development or take part in government-led projects is vital if development efforts are to produce lasting results.”

In all four countries, many organisations deliberately curb their freedom of expression for fear of being labelled government opponents, a form of stigmatisation that can lead to further restrictions, harassment and possibly homicide.

In Colombia, the government has placed large-scale mining, gas and oil extraction at the centre of national plans for economic growth and development. Organisations working to uphold human rights and protect the environment have serious concerns about this model of development but feel

stigmatise and excluded from debates.

“Governments need to involve civil society organisations in the design, content and implementation of development plans. In particular, indigenous groups and other marginalised and disadvantaged groups should be able to participate in policy-making processes,” says Julia Duchrow, head of the ACT Alliance community of practice on human rights and development.

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Notes to Editor:

1. <http://www.actalliance.org/resources/publications/Space%20for%20civil%20society.pdf/view>
2. ACT Alliance is a coalition of more than 140 churches and affiliated organisations working together in 140 countries to create positive and sustainable change in the lives of poor and marginalised people regardless of their religion, politics, gender, sexual orientation, race or nationality in keeping with the highest international codes and standards. ACT Alliance is supported by 25,000 staff and mobilises about \$1.5 billion for its work each year in three targeted areas: humanitarian aid; development; and advocacy.
3. CIDSE is an international alliance of Catholic development agencies. Its 17 members from Europe and North America share a common strategy in their efforts to eradicate poverty and establish global justice. Our work consists of joint advocacy in the areas of resources for development, climate justice, food and sustainable agriculture, and business and human rights, as well as on our cross-cutting priorities: sustainable development, global governance and gender equality.
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