

8.4 ACFID Resolution 4-2019

RESOLUTION on the role of ODA in defending civil society space

1. ACFID notes that:
 - a. A strong civil society is crucial for any functioning democracy, and essential in nations that experience structural limitations in their capacity to provide services for their citizens. A vibrant and diverse array of civil society organisations can help nations build more inclusive institutions and advocate for comprehensive solutions to social and economic problems.
 - b. NGOs and civil society organisations (CSOs) in many countries in the Indo-Pacific operate in an increasingly constricted environment, challenging their ability to hold governments to account, while also providing critical services such as healthcare, education and humanitarian assistance.
 - c. The work of CSOs is protected and promoted in international human rights law, including in human rights treaties to which Australia is a party to and which are binding on Australia. This includes the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, among others.¹
 - d. The importance of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, which provides for the support and protection of human rights defenders in their work. In particular, recalling Articles 2(1) and 12, which reflect the States' responsibility to protect everyone under law, individually and in association with others, to enjoy all rights and freedoms in practice.
 - e. The 2018 CIVICUS report on the State of Civil Society² found that CSOs internationally face significant challenges, including:
 - i. Narrow, top-down development approaches towards project delivery
 - ii. Threats to national stability and security being used to restrict democratic freedoms and suppress democratic demands
 - iii. Increasing economic inequality, with a lack of policies addressing the gap
 - iv. States limiting the capacity of CSOs to participate in elections
 - f. The Australian Government's Foreign Policy White Paper 2017 states that Australia's values, including support for political, economic and religious freedoms, liberal democracy, the rule of law, racial and gender equality and mutual respect reflects who we are and how we approach the world.
 - g. However, since ACFID last considered the space for civil society in resolution 2/2017 and the country visit of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders in 2016,³ challenges for civil society still remain in Australia. This includes:
 - i. Insufficient operational funding to organisations who play an important role in advocacy
 - ii. Meaningful participation of CSOs in government decision-making
 - iii. The presence of 'gag' clauses in federal and state funding partnerships and funding agreements
 - h. Protecting and promoting the civil society space in Australia is essential to uphold democratic values and the fundamental freedoms which are integral to Australia's national interest.
 - i. Promoting those values internationally, particularly in the Pacific, provides Australia with the opportunity to build more viable states less vulnerable to their geographic, climatic, economic and political contexts – creating stability, building buffers to political and economic shocks; and creating more resilient democracies and societies.
2. ACFID:
 - a. Commits to ensuring the Australian Government to further strengthens Australia's foreign policy by advancing the grounding values of political, economic and religious freedoms.
 - b. Supports its partners and members in their programs to preserve citizens' rights around the world and here at home.
 - c. Supports the Australian government building firmer partnerships and institutional arrangements between Australian CSOs and Pacific local CSOs through capacity-building, mentoring and professional exchange, and supporting and fostering relationships between local CSOs and local Governments.
 - d. Calls for new civil society projects and increased funding for Global NGO Programs, as well as long-term, flexible assistance for civil society strengthening through country and regional programs.

Moved: Mat Tinkler, Save The Children Australia

Seconded: Lyn Morgain, Oxfam Australia