

Concept Note Side Event

61ST SESSION OF THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

SAFEGUARDING CIVIL SOCIETY SPACE AT THE UNITED NATIONS

Tuesday, 17 March 2026: 14:00 to 15:00 CEST, Palais des Nations (Room XI), Geneva or

Online: <https://shorturl.at/pAH4X>



The **Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES)** and the **International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)** invite to a **side-event** during the 61st session of the Human Rights Council to discuss the vital contribution of civil society organisations and Indigenous Peoples to the UN human rights system and why it matters to safeguard their space in the context of reforms and crises. The latest publication by FES and ICJ “*Safeguarding Civil Society Space at the United Nations - A Crucial Element in Human Rights Promotion and Protection*” examines the indispensable role of civil society in the UN human rights system and the growing pressures that threaten its participation. The report concludes that protecting and strengthening civil society participation is key. It calls to reverse restrictive trends and invest in the conditions that allow civil society to contribute fully to the protection of human rights worldwide. The event will offer the opportunity to reflect on these issues at a time when multilateralism, the UN and the human rights pillar in particular are under severe attacks and reform.

Speakers:

- H.E. Ambassador Noel White, Permanent Representative of Ireland to the UN
- H.E. Ambassador Doreen de Brum, Permanent Representative of the Marshall Islands to the UN
- H.E. Ambassador Gustavo Gallon, Permanent Representative of Colombia to the UN
- H.E. Ambassador Muhammadou Kah, Permanent Representative of the Gambia to the UN

- H.E. Ambassador Michele Cervone D'Urso, Deputy Permanent Observer of the EU
- Santiago Canton, Secretary General of the International Commission of Jurists
- Inès Osman, Executive Director of the MENA Rights Group

Moderator: Renate Tenbusch, Director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Geneva Office

Background

Today, multilateralism, the rule of law and the global human rights movement are under severe attack. Yet, as armed conflicts, instability and multiple threats are leading many States to prioritize security and military expenditures over human rights, “*addressing human rights emergencies are the best tools we have to prevent and mitigate conflict; and to build peace*”, as in the words of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Within a very difficult geopolitical environment, and a major reform process on the 80th anniversary of the United Nations (UN80) taking place in the context of massive budgetary cuts to the organization, the UN human rights system in Geneva, which was already severely under-resourced, has taken enormous hits. The UN80 reform process converges with other ongoing processes including a long-standing discussion to strengthen the efficiency of the UN Human Rights Council that celebrates its 20 years this year. These converging processes represent opportunities for States to preserve and strengthen the fundamental role that civil society has been playing.

However, in these perilous times, there is a clear and legitimate fear that the role of civil society may be severely undermined as capacities to carry out this work are decreasing. At stake are hard won battles to recognize and promote the role that Human Rights Defenders and civil society actors (CSOs) like NGOs and trade unions play in the system. The access of CSOs to the UN in Geneva and to the work of the HRC have been steadily shrinking in the last years with a clear acceleration particularly since after the COVID 19 pandemic. Yet, CSOs have historically been a vital engine for human rights protection and for the promotion of the creation of a system that better responds to the needs of rights-holders, victims and survivors of human rights violations and abuses. In general, CSOs have been instrumental in feeding key information, expertise and evidence-based research into the UN Human Rights system, and in ensuring that the system is accessible for rights-holders, victims and survivors and that it is known and used by people and communities at national and community levels.

The FES-ICJ publication examines the indispensable role of civil society in the UN human rights system and the growing pressures that threaten its participation. The report documents a convergence of restrictive trends, including shrinking civic space, increased reprisals against those cooperating with the UN, politicized accreditation processes, declining funding for civil society and human rights institutions and administrative practices that limit access and participation. These pressures are compounded by shifts in donor priorities towards military and security spending, a contracting funding environment for human rights work and cost-cutting measures within the UN itself. Together, they have reduced opportunities for meaningful engagement and weakened independent oversight at a time of escalating global crises. The analysis also shows how restrictions rarely occur through single decisions, but instead accumulate through incremental, political, technical or procedural changes. The report concludes that protecting and strengthening civil society participation is not optional. It calls to reverse restrictive trends and invest in the conditions that allow civil society to contribute fully to the protection of human rights worldwide.