**Joint Statement on Equal Participation in Political and Public Affairs**

Human Rights Council 45th session

Item 3 (22 September 2020)

Thank you Madame President.

I have the honor to deliver this joint statement on behalf of 45 signatories listed on the extranet.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights stipulates in Article 25 the right of every citizen to take part in the conduct of public affairs*, to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections and to have access to public service in his or her country. Other core international human rights treaties elaborate further on equal participation as an important human rights obligation enabling the enjoyment of an array of other rights and freedoms.*

Equal and effective public participation is a key element of democracy, the rule of law*, social inclusion and economic development.* It also plays a crucial role in advancing gender equality. The active and meaningful participation of women, *on equal terms as men*, is essential to the achievement of equality, *sustainable development and peace.* The wave of protests that erupted across the world over the last year have clearly demonstrated people need avenues to express their concerns and take part in shaping the policies that so deeply affect their lives.

The current exceptional situation of public global health emergency has further highlighted the importance of meaningful participation. To effectively combat the pandemic, everyone has to be part of the response. Equal participation of all persons, including vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, such as people with disabilities, in decision-making as well as shaping and implementation of the response, is vital. *The fragility of local communities exposed the need to enhance inclusivity of policy making at the local level. This situation requires people to be informed, have a voice in decisions that affect them and governments to be open, transparent and responsive.*

*Relevant information should reach everyone.* People must be provided with reliable and comprehensive information on COVID-19 and the measures taken by authorities in response to the pandemic. Hence the role of the free press is crucial. Journalists and the media must be able to report freely on the pandemic and the measures to combat it, *including critics of the governments’ approach*. Civil society organizations operating within open civic space are also essential components of the response. *States should facilitate the work of journalists and civil society and protect them from any threats or attacks, online and offline.* The crisis highlighted the need to strengthen efforts at bridging the digital divide, within and between countries.

In the current *extraordinary* situation, we appreciate *that the UN Secretary General as well as* the High Commissioner for Human Rights consistently stress the crucial importance of *equal* participation *in the response to the pandemic* and also provide useful guidance and recommendations to states *on how to implement the right to participate under the new circumstances.*

These recommendations aptly complement the Guidelines on the effective implementation of the right to participate in public affairs presented by the Human Rights Council t*o member states and all other stakeholders* in 2018 *which include practical orientations and recommendations for States as well as other relevant stakeholders in relation to the effective implementation of the right to participate in public affairs.*

We encourage all governments*, local authorities and* other stakeholders to implement all these recommendations as well as to use the Guidelines as appropriate *to ensure people, including the most vulnerable and those furthest behind, can have a say in decisions that so critically affect them.*

Madame President, active and meaningful civic participation enhances the legitimacy of states decisions and their ownership by all members of society*. It fosters trust in public authorities and ensures public buy-in for policies adopted.* This is particularly valid in the context of the current situation of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, which has immense consequences for our lives*. Hence, we remain committed to working towards the improved enjoyment of the right to participate in public affairs at this Council and beyond.*

I thank you.