

## **Letter of Concern on Civil Society Restrictions in India**

As global citizens, and members of global civil society, we express deep concern about the closing civil society space and muzzling of dissent in India. We fear public vilification of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), bureaucratic harassment, cutting off of international and sometimes national support/ donations is creating a prohibitive environment for civil society in India and undercutting their freedom of association and expression-- integral to democracies and upheld by International human rights agreements.

We uphold democracy as a universal value that rests on the principle of sovereignty of citizens. Nationally and internationally, its cardinal principle guarantees citizens rights - to assemble peacefully, to speak out, criticize and dissent without fear or unlawful interference - as long as such action does not lead to inhuman or unconstitutional action. It empowers us to associate with others, to communicate and advocate our views, to seek and give support including financial donations locally and globally

We have looked upon India as the world's largest democracy not merely in letter but in spirit. Open discussion, debate, criticism, and dissent have been intrinsic to India. It is often celebrated that India's free press, watchful civil society, and its regime of political and civil rights have kept the government vigilant, checked defective policies, drawn attention to the suffering of the people, prevented famines. India CSOs have been an integral part of global civil society movement, working for a better, just, and a more sustainable world. Besides richly contributing to the progressive policy frameworks in their own country, their achievements in institutionalizing pre-legislative consultations, environmental impact assessment, making information a right, innovations in people led and designed social protection programs- have become models for civil society and government in other countries. Clearly people centric CSOs and movements that enhance rights and set benchmarks nationally and globally should be a matter of pride for any government. It is therefore shocking and deeply disconcerting that CSOs in India are facing intimidation and difficulties in their vital work. Given India's role in the globalised economy and openness to foreign capital, it defies logic that democratic, environmental, developmental and human rights CSOs are being targeted and obstructed from receiving international donations. This is paralyzing their work and forcing them to shut down operations. Our colleagues at Greenpeace India for instance, are under threat of closure, as their bank accounts including their domestic ones, have been blocked on flimsy legal pretexts.

India's vibrant civil society is a national asset and an inseparable part of the country's democratic culture. We express our increasing worry that arbitrary punitive actions by the government are creating an atmosphere of hostility against them and placing them under threat. We, join our voices with that of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in stating that "active civil society, freedom of information, expression and assembly and participation in decision making are critical if we are to deliver real transformation and a sustainable future for all"<sup>11</sup>

We extend our solidarity and friendship to all working for sustainable development in India. We call for:

1. End to coercive actions against NGOs and donors, without reasonable cause or due process, which seek to cripple the ability of these organisations to carry on their legitimate and sanctioned work.
2. Unblocking of Greenpeace India's bank accounts and an urgent review of all orders placing restraints on organizations, and revocation of such orders where due process has not been followed by the government, no redress mechanism is clearly stated, or grounds are vague, subjective or flimsy. Those we are currently aware of include, among others, *INSAF, Peoples Watch, Sabrang Trust, Greenpeace India, Ford Foundation, HIVOS and ICCO, Cord Aid*.
3. Initiate an immediate dialogue between the NGO sector and Government to address our concerns

Sincerely,