

Charter for Improving Civil Society Engagement with the League of Arab States

We, the undersigned civil society organisations, based in different Arab countries,

Recognising the foundational importance for inter-governmental organisations, including the League of Arab States, of engaging in genuine consultations with civil society so as to improve their policy and decision-making processes, to build better relations with their constituents, who are ultimately the people living in Arab States, and to promote greater democracy in and accountability for their work;

Noting that the League of Arab States falls far short of better international practice, including the practice of similar inter-governmental organisations in other regions of the world, when it comes to engaging with civil society;

Stressing that the current civil society engagement arrangements and practices at the League of Arab States not only fail to respect basic human rights and democratic norms but also undermine the effectiveness, influence and legitimacy of the League of Arab States;

Emphasising that the trend, at both the national government and the inter-governmental levels, is strongly towards increasing engagement opportunities for civil society;

Recalling that effective engagement involves transparency, particularly around the subjects of engagement, and concrete and effective consultation opportunities;

Highlighting the fact that many civil society organisations based in Arab countries are both interested in and fully able to participate effectively in more genuine engagement opportunities at the League of Arab States, should such opportunities become available;

Call on the League of Arab States to undertake the following actions to improve its engagement with civil society:

1. Consultations about Engagement

The League of Arab States should conduct an open and inclusive process of consultation with civil society with a view to putting in place a new framework for engagement. This should respect the following:

- The process should be collaborative in nature, along the lines of a partnership or joint effort between the parties,¹ with the League of Arab States working closely with civil society to explore options for a strong engagement framework.

¹ As an example, Open Government Partnership (OGP) guidance on consultation is available at: http://www.opengovpartnership.org/sites/default/files/attachments/OGP_consultation%20FINAL.pdf.

- The process should be transparent, with the League of Arab States providing civil society with access to all of the documents it needs to participate fully in the consultation process and with information about the positions of different stakeholders and how it was used being provided.
- The League of Arab States should make a commitment at the beginning of the process to revise substantially its current approach to civil society engagement, including by adopting a new policy framework for this.
- Consideration should be given to creating a new, dedicated structure within the League of Arab States to lead on this process, in an attempt to address current relationship shortcomings and to build trust with civil society.

2. Access to Information

Ensuring access to information is key to building trust and to facilitating real engagement. The League of Arab States should practise far greater levels of openness than in the past. Following consultations, it should adopt a dedicated information disclosure policy in line with better international practice among inter-governmental organisations. In the meantime, it should do the following:

- Publish, sufficiently in advance, information, including the agendas, of key meetings and other engagement opportunities, along with key relevant background documents, subject only to legitimate grounds for secrecy.
- Respond promptly and fulsomely to requests for information, including by appointing staff with dedicated responsibilities for doing this.
- Take full advantage, in doing the above, of digital technologies, including by providing information for free and in open digital formats.

3. Short-term Engagement Measures

The League of Arab States should undertake the following measures to improve engagement over the short term, pending the outcome of the consultation process noted above:

- The current observer status system should be transformed into a consultative status approach, so that individuals and organisations with status benefit from a range of engagement rights and opportunities. This should include the rights to make submissions and interventions, and not merely the right to attend meetings and listen to official actors.
- The process of obtaining status should be open, streamlined and insulated from political or other irrelevant considerations, so that status is given to any organisation which meets pre-defined conditions for obtaining consultative status.
- To the extent possible, the grant of status should directly enable the holder to engage with a range of League of Arab States bodies, including, in particular, those dealing with human rights and economic and social development.
- A number of engagement options beyond the status system should be put in place, such as the ability to apply on an *ad hoc* basis to attend a particular meeting or to work with the League of Arab States to implement projects or policies.