**Create and Maintain the Space for Civil Society to Work freely and independently. By ACHIRIMBI NGWA JOSEPH**

**Space to Work**

As a research investigator Field Organization that cover a wide variety of work (including equality, mental health, disability, access to information, migrant’s rights, children and prisoners). Our strength comes from coming together in collective action, sharing expertise and building capacity. We would suggest that:

Human rights organizations can add value to the work of civil society by building knowledge and skills on human rights within organizations and amongst staff members. It is useful if human rights are integrated into the work of organizations on a variety of subjects rather than creating a supersized, centralizing human rights organization. Human rights organizations can bring organizations together to find common ground on issues and instigate collective action, speaking with one voice.

Human rights organizations can offer a shield for individual organization that are afraid for a variety of reasons to speak out alone on an issue. It is important to be part of international networks to learn from other jurisdictions and build expertise.

There is room for improvement in the cultural, Legal and Political environment in which civil society operates in the Cameroon. The Cameroon Government has announced plans to abolish the Human Rights Act and replace it with a Bill of Rights. This sends out the wrong message about human rights domestically and internationally. Also, by passing “The Lobbying Act” the Cameroon Government has limited our ability to exercise our civil and political rights both directly and indirectly.

The Cameroon Government has failed to ensure that access to information rights remain strong in Cameroon which impacts negatively on civil society’s ability to access information and make informed opinions on the delivery and funding of public services. There is concern that more explicit action to prevent and address cyber bullying of investigators field is needed from police and from investigations to ensure we retain our free liberty.

1. **Human Rights are universal and should be promoted and respected**

In Cameroon the Human Rights Act (HRA) has still to reach its potential in everyday places and situations. There is too little evidence that the HRA is considered and applied in the design, delivery and funding of public services. Instead of promoting greater explicit compliance, the Cameroon Government is attacking the operation of the HRA by planning to abolish it. The Government is demonizing human rights and setting a bad example to other countries.

It is important to emphasize that there is no appetite for reform of the HRA in Cameroon. For example the Cameroonian Parliament voted in support of the HRA and ECHR in November 2014, the Government has refused to support any such action and at the Parliament 58 out of 59MPs support the retention of the HRA.

1. **Enable active participation in public affairs**

The ‘Transparency of Lobbying Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014’ sends out the wrong message to civil society organizations in our democracy.

The “Lobbying Act” amended legislation passed in 2000 that also proved problematic. Under part two, campaigning organizations such as charities must now register with the Electoral Commission as non- party campaigners if they spend more than a threshold of $20,000 in NWR and $10,000 in on certain regulated activities during the election period. The election period includes referenda, council elections as well as general elections and Parliament Elections. The Act expands the list of regulated activities and lowers the upper spending limits. The impact has been various e.g. there has been a chilling effect on the activities of some organizations and some have scaled back their available may be reduced, making it more difficult to form an opinion. That is not good for our democracy.

The Council for Voluntary Organizations (SCVO) announced it will “ignore” the Lobbying Act and not register with the Electoral Commission, calling the Act a “direct attack on charities “right to campaign”

1. **Robust access to information rights, transparency and accountability**

The Freedom of Information introduced an enforceable right to access to information but the value of the right has been diminished as the way that public services are delivered has changed. There is a need for legal reform to provide a right of access to information where public money is involved. Transparency and openness should be part of doing business with the public sector.

The Government’s consultation on extending the scope of published in June 2015, is very disappointing as it fails to extend the enforceable right to access information to all arms- length organization(ALEOs) running public – service facilities, organizations such as the Convention of Local Authoritiesand to housing associations.

There need to be a simple system so that people can assert their right to receive information from public bodies, rather than the current, confusing system where some bodies are covered and some are not.

1. **Ensure the free press is able to thrive**

Cyber bulling members of the media is having a serious effect on freedom of expression. A survey into the extend of online abuse against journalists has revealed cases where reporters have feared for their own personal safety as a result of cyber bullying. In some cases it led to journalists retreating from the use of social media and worrying about what stories to cover and how to report them. It should be noted that using social media is often part of the job which a journalist is required to undertake, in addition to writing copy or delivering broadcasts.

A survey, for the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), revealed that journalists were self-censoring material they were writing, as a result of online abuse, threats of violence and intimidation where journalists and/or their families had been threatened

It is a mayor problem for freedom of expression if journalists, acting as watchdogs for the public, develop tendencies towards self-censorship, avoiding contentious stories, undermining the fundamental human right to freedom of expression in order to avoid being threatened and abused. Overall we are concerned about protecting the public from the ‘chill effect’ persistent abuse is having on individual journalists and workplaces. In addition to the NUJ’s concerns for the health and wellbeing of its members and their families, such actions impact upon society’s right to be informed and the public are therefore unable to make rational and well-informed decisions about what is happening in society.

**What civil society needs**

Although the HRCS works in a positive climate which values our contributions, we do not have long- term financial resources. This is now severely limiting our ability to act, just when human rights are particularly under threat. Although the Government supports equality groups, it does not fund any organizations solely working on human rights. It would be helpful if a recommendation to fund human rights organizations could be made by the High Commissioner for Human Rights in his report.

Receiving a proportion of our income from government would not undermine our ability to act independently and we would continue to work in partnership and influence positive change in our communities. It should be noted that in the current climate of austerity in Cameroon, civil society is facing severe cuts and so our ability to raise money from members is limited.