

17th March, 2021.

PRESS RELEASE

SDI CALLS FOR THE STATE TO RESPECT NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PRINCIPLES TO ENABLE AND PROTECT CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

The Society for Democratic Initiatives is concerned with the Press Release issued on Monday the 15th March 2021, by the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, in which they state:

“The Gazette Number 2, Vol. CL VIII has published list of NGOs that are legally registered with the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development for the period 2020-2021. The public is accordingly informed that the NGOs listed in the said Gazette are considered legitimate to operate in Sierra Leone for the period indicated. The public is advised not to deal with any NGO that is not included in this Gazette.”

SDI considers this statement misleading and erroneous. The State appears to be restricting and limiting CSO's, NGO's, CBO's, faith-based organization and the civic space. SDI wishes to remind the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development that there are National and International principles that protect and defend civil society and Sierra Leone is no exception. Sierra Leone is a signatory to a number of International treaties, which promote democracy and the involvement of people in governance (civil society).

Section 26(1) of the Sierra Leone Constitution of 1991, highlights the protection of civil society:

“Except with his own consent no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of assembly and association, that is to say his right to assemble freely and associate with other persons and particular to form or belong to any political party, trade unions or other economic, social, or professional association, national or international for the protection in his interest.”

SDI wants to reiterate the right to operate from unwarranted State interference, which prescribes that International law creates a presumption against any regulation or restriction that will amount to interference of a recognized right, unless where it has to deal with national security or public safety. CSO's are protected against unwarranted State intrusion in their internal governance affairs.

The African Charter on Human and People's Rights, the United Nations Convention on Civil and Political Rights, Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention are all treaties and conventions that guarantees and forms part of the seven (7) international principles for the protection of civil society.

The new, draconian NGO policy reflects a worrying trend of encroaching on civic space. The government is using such excuses as “counter terrorism” and “greater regulations for CSO’s and NGO’s to improve accountability”, to restrict the ability of CSOs to form, operate and receive funding and to transfer ideas and information between citizens, members and State. This is despite the remarkable contribution and progress NGOs and CSOs have made towards promoting democracy and human rights in Sierra Leone. The new NGO policy exposes NGOs to serious challenges in terms of autonomy, governance and accountability.

Over the years CSOs operating in Sierra Leone have taken significant steps to confront the worrying trend even though government has increasingly become obvious in their efforts to limit civic space, especially CSOs advocating for democracy and human rights.

Finally, SDI wishes to remind the State that they have a duty to promote and respect human rights and fundamental freedoms. The State also has the obligation to protect the rights of civil society. The State duty is both negative (i.e. to refrain from interfering with human rights and fundamental freedoms) and positive (i.e. to ensure respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms).

End of Release

For further information please contact on the following numbers + 23276647456/078155450