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WHY WE ARE NOT ENGAGING WITH THE G20'S CIVIL SOCIETY PROCESS IN 2020

The annual G20 summit often seems like a talking shop for the world's most powerful governments. The leaders of 19 of the largest national economies plus the European Union get together, shake hands in front of the cameras, and make vague agreements, many of which they don't implement. The summits draw the attention of the world's media, and – frequently – protesters from around the world who want to hold those governments to account.

Less well known is the extensive cycle of preparatory meetings leading up to the G20 leaders' summit. Despite the many limitations and challenges of the process, for many voices from outside government – especially trade unions, rights groups and civil society – these are rare opportunities to make policy recommendations directly to national authorities and to influence the global agenda on issues that affect billions of people. For the last few years, there has even been a dedicated stream of meetings for civil society within the G20, known as the Civil 20 (C20).

In 2020, however, we as civil society organizations will be keeping our distance from the official C20 process, which will be hosted by and in Saudi Arabia.

G20 host Saudi Arabia has tried to promote an image of itself as a modern country attractive for foreign investors. The government has recruited expensive Western PR advisors and spent millions of dollars to polish its image and suppress criticism from international media. Meanwhile, at home the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia regularly arrests and prosecutes human rights defenders, censors free speech, limits free movement, and tortures and mistreats detained journalists and activists. Vaguely worded counter-terror laws are used to silence government critics, including through the imposition of the death penalty. In October 2018, the world was shocked by the brutal murder of journalist and dissident Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Women face systematic discrimination in law and practice. In addition, women human rights defenders who dare defend the rights of women are subjected to judicial persecution, arbitrary arrests and detention.

Instead of real reform, the Saudi government has been trying to whitewash its dire human rights record by holding major international events in the country. This includes the G20 and – through a government-authorized NGO – the C20. As leading civil society organisations present in most countries around the world (but notably not Saudi Arabia), we cannot participate in a process that seeks to give international legitimacy to a state that provides virtually no space for civil society, and where independent civil society voices are not tolerated.

In June 2019, the C20 established a set of principles, including a basic structure and operating mechanisms, to ensure its sustainability and effectiveness. The C20 principles emphasize inclusion of a variety of civil society actors, from local to global; transparency of decision-making; freedom and independence from undue influence by any non-civil society actors; inclusiveness and diversity; and the guiding values of human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment. Most of these principles will be absent in 2020, and more alarmingly we are already seeing the Saudi G20 presidency undermining these principles.

Virtually no domestic civil society actors will be able to participate in the upcoming C20 in Saudi Arabia, other than a token number of organisations working on issues deemed inoffensive by the Saudi government, since the Saudi authorities do not allow the existence of political parties, trade unions or independent human rights groups. Most progressive civil society activists are on trial or serving long prison sentences for speaking up, or have been forced into exile in order to avoid prison or worse. Returning to the country is not an option, as it will put them at risk. Without these independent and critical voices in the room, the credibility of the C20 is severely compromised.

Foreign and international civil society actors would also face significant challenges in freely participating in a Saudi-organised C20 event.

Existing laws and policies in Saudi Arabia not only directly affect the rights to freedom of association, expression and peaceful assembly, but also create a chilling effect that acts to silence certain categories of activists who, if they were to speak out, would be jeopardizing their own safety. Moreover, in November 2019, Saudi Arabia's state security agency categorised feminism and homosexuality as crimes. While the announcement was rectified, Saudi Arabia's leading women human rights defenders are still behind bars and prosecuted for their human rights work. These laws and practices contradict C20 principles on diversity, gender equality and the empowerment of women, and they would stifle freedom of expression in discussions on women's rights, sexual and reproductive rights, and LGBTI rights.

This is compounded by a serious lack of press freedom in Saudi Arabia. Strict media controls, censorship and surveillance of social media, mean any discussions held at a Saudi-led C20 would never reach the wider Saudi population beyond a state-sanctioned narrative. Even if any such discussions were possible, without free media all meaningful discussions at the C20 would benefit only a limited audience. This is inconsistent with the C20's guiding principles of inclusiveness, openness, transparency and participation.

Previous G20 summits have seen protests by activists from the host state and elsewhere. Freedom of peaceful assembly is a right, but in a country where all gatherings, including peaceful demonstrations, are prohibited, there is no possibility that this fundamental right will be respected.

The Saudi-led C20 process is lacking in many respects, most notably in guaranteeing the C20's fundamental principles. Even this early in the 2020 C20 process we have observed a marked lack of transparency from the C20 hosts. The appointment of the Chairs of working groups and various committees was opaque and non-consultative, while arbitrary decisions have excluded experienced international groups. The C20 process led by the King Khalid Foundation, which is connected to the Saudi Royal Family, cannot be considered as transparent, inclusive and participatory, as required by the C20 Principles.

At a time when the world is facing a wide range of challenges, independent voices are needed more than ever. A state that closes civic space until it is virtually non-existent cannot be trusted to guarantee the basic conditions for international civil society to exchange ideas and collaborate freely on any issue, let alone those issues it deems sensitive or offensive.

While we will not participate in the C20 this year, we commit to work together to make sure those voices are heard in 2020.

