

PRESS RELEASE



Civil Society Locked out at UN Anti-Corruption Summit, Calling Effectiveness of Global Convention into Question

Marrakesh, 28 October 2011 - Against the backdrop of popular revolutions and protests across the world, governments at the UN Anti-Corruption summit this week in Marrakesh, Morocco, have chosen to continue locking civil society out of the enforcement process of the only truly global anti-corruption convention, the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC). This was the overarching issue for governments, the UN and civil society alike during the five day conference.

“The decision not to include civil society leaves things dangerously open-ended during a critical period in which the convention review process is still being shaped and when there is a need in the region and beyond for a strong and inclusive convention,” said Slagjana Taseva, Chair of the UNCAC Coalition of civil society organizations, speaking today from the conference in Marrakesh. “In deciding against civil society participation, governments have shown themselves to be out of touch with their own people and on the wrong side of history.”

A poor compromise

In a round of horse-trading, governments reached a poor compromise that dramatically narrows access for civil society organisations. Instead of full observer status they will only have access to so-called briefings on the work of the review group. But the UNCAC Coalition emphasised that anything less than full observer status is unacceptable and contravenes the applicable rules of procedure, as explained by the UN Office of Legal Affairs. The disappointing final outcome stood in stark contrast to public statements of support from many governments.

The position of those governments that spearheaded a move to block civil society from participating in the Implementation Review Group (the body that assesses whether governments are living up to their obligations under the convention) and those governments that stood idly by, is all the more outrageous

given that the involvement of civil society is built into the letter of the convention, reflected in the rules of procedure for the Convention, and upheld by a written opinion from the UN Legal Affairs Office.

Some positive developments

There were some welcome developments during the conference in Marrakesh, namely a commitment on the prevention of corruption agreed by states and the strengthening of the stolen asset recovery framework, an issue that is particularly important to countries such as Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, and others that have seen public money siphoned off by corrupt elites and stashed overseas. But the effectiveness of these measures may ultimately be undermined by the absence of a civil society voice.

“It is tragic that the momentum provided by the Arab spring on the return of stolen assets did little to solidify the role of civil society in convention enforcement, although a strong citizen voice was the central element of the uprisings in the region,” said Christiaan Poortman, the head of Transparency International’s delegation at the UN conference in Marrakesh. “After four years of struggling to cement the role of civil society in the UNCAC review process we face the disheartening prospect of being locked out for another two years, a setback for the global fight against corruption that will ultimately impact ordinary citizens worldwide”.

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Note to Editors: The United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) is the most comprehensive global legal framework for combating corruption. It is a binding agreement by 154 states parties on standards and requirements for preventing, detecting, investigating and sanctioning corruption.

The UNCAC Coalition, formed in 2006, is composed of more than 300 civil society organisations in over 60 countries. Its goal is to promote ratification, implementation and monitoring of the UN Convention against Corruption.