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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Elizka Relief Foundation, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[29 May 2023]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Freedom of Opinion and Expression and Sustainable Development: Why Voice Is Important?

Preamble

In Ethiopia, which is the focus of the Foundation's work, the Ethiopian authorities are committing grave human rights violations related to freedom of opinion, expression and access to information, especially in the context of the armed conflict that has been existing for over two years in Tigray region in the north of the country, which had serious negative repercussions on the achievement and realization of sustainable development. In this context, Elizka Relief Foundation noted that the Ethiopian authorities, over the past years, have restricted the freedom of individuals to freedom of opinion, expression and access to information, which was evident in the unjustified restrictions imposed by the Ethiopian authorities on traditional and digital media, and the acts of intimidation, harassment and arrests that journalists are subjected to because of their coverage of sensitive issues, particularly those related to human rights violations and political opposition, as well as restrictions imposed on social media, harassment and attacks on activists, human rights defenders, members of opposition parties and bloggers who criticize the government, in addition to the restrictions imposed by the authorities on civil society organizations, which hampered their ability to operate freely and independently.

In light of the foregoing, Elizka Relief Foundation presents in this intervention an overview and detailed observations of the crucial relationship between freedom of expression and achieving sustainable development, as well as the serious human rights violations committed by the Ethiopian authorities in terms of the right of individuals to freedom of opinion, expression and access to information, which serious negative repercussions on achieving and implementing sustainable development, which will be discussed in some detail as follows:

Critical Relationship Between Freedom of Opinion and Expression and Achieving Sustainable Development

Elizka Relief Foundation has always emphasized that there is a crucial and interdependent relationship between freedom of opinion and expression and the achievement of sustainable development. Freedom of opinion and expression is necessary and important for the realization and achievement of sustainable development. In this context, freedom of opinion, expression and access to information enables individuals to participate in decision-making that affects their lives and enables individuals to express their opinions, interests, and ideas, and helps them to contribute to the formulation and implementation of policies and practices that address the societal challenges facing them, which is necessary and vital to achieving sustainable development, as this action ensures that the voices of all stakeholders are heard and making decisions that best serve the interests of society.

Freedom of opinion and expression also enables individuals to hold governments accountable for their actions. Individuals' access to information and expression of their issues would enhance transparency and encourage accountability of governments for their actions in general and for development projects in particular, which is necessary and vital to achieving sustainable development and strengthening rational governance, as this action ensures that governments adhere to the standards of governance and that they are unable to abuse their power. In addition, freedom of opinion and expression encourages innovation and creativity and the exchange of knowledge and ideas, which promotes an environment conducive to research and development, scientific progress and technological innovation, which are essential to achieving sustainable development.(1)

Violations by the Ethiopian authorities related to freedom of opinion and expression that impede the achievement of sustainable development

The Ethiopian authorities have committed grave human rights violations related to freedom of opinion, expression and access to information, especially in the context of armed conflict that has been leading for more than two years in the northern Tigray region of the country, which had serious negative repercussions on achieving and implementing sustainable development, and we can highlight these violations on as follows:

1. Censorship and Restrictions on the Media:

The Ethiopian government imposed severe censorship and restrictions on traditional and digital media, as journalists working in media organizations faced intimidation, harassment, and arrests due to their media coverage of some sensitive issues, especially those related to human rights violations committed by the Ethiopian authorities in Tigray. The Ethiopian government also revoked the licenses of media outlets that criticize its policies, which created a limited space for the independent press. On February 1, 2023, for example, the Ethiopian authorities banned 15 foreign media outlets that were operating in the Somali regional state of Ethiopia, including BBC Somali and Universal TV. This action was in response to reports published by these media outlets that detected corruption and committed human rights violations (2). On July 15, 2021, the Ethiopian Media Regulatory Authority (EMRA) suspended the license of the popular English-language online news website, Addis Standard, an opposition news site, on the grounds of “advancing the agenda of a terrorist group.”(3)

2. Arresting, Harassment and Intimidation of Journalists:

Journalists who criticize the government or write about sensitive issues have been subjected to harassment, intimidation, and arrest by the Ethiopian authorities, which has created a climate of fear and self-censorship, which has prevented journalists from freely expressing their opinions or conducting survey investigations. In May 2022, for example, the authorities arrested 19 Ethiopian journalists and media professionals in Addis Ababa and the Amhara region, with allegations of committing crimes of incitement to violence and other ambiguous crimes.(4) In the same month, the Ethiopian authorities revoked the license of (T.J.), a reporter for The Economist newspaper in Addis Ababa, and proceeded to expel him outside the country, accusing him of adopting a misleading approach in dealing with journalistic issues.(5)

3. Disabling the Internet, Communications, and Blocking Social Media:

The Ethiopian authorities have completely disrupted access to the internet, cut off telecommunications and mobile phone networks, and blocked social media in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia since June 2021, in order to control the flow of information, especially during periods of armed fighting, political unrest and protests, which limited the ability of more than six million people to communicate with their families for nearly two years, restricted their ability to express their opinions, and impeded their access to independent sources of news and information.(6)

Recommendations:

There is a crucial and interdependent relationship between freedom of opinion and expression and the achievement of sustainable development. Freedom of opinion and expression is necessary and important for the realization and achievement of sustainable development. In light of the foregoing, Elizka Relief Foundation recommends the Human Rights Council urge the Ethiopian government to implement the following measures to enhance freedom of opinion and expression in a way that guarantees the implementation and achieving sustainable development in Ethiopia:

- Conducting a comprehensive review of laws and regulations that restrict freedom of opinion and expression, such as anti-terrorism laws and defamation laws, in order to bring them in line with international human rights standards.
- Ending practices related to disrupting the internet and communications, remove restrictions on access to online platforms and social media, and ensure that access to the internet remains open, unrestricted and accessible to all.
- Establishing an independent and impartial media regulatory body that is not subject to government control.
- Taking concrete measures to protect journalists, media workers, bloggers, human rights defenders and activists from harassment, intimidation and attacks, investigate cases of violence against them and hold perpetrators accountable, and create a safe and enabling environment for them to perform their work without fear of reprisals.
- Enacting and implementing strict laws that guarantee the public's right to access government information, and establishing transparent and effective mechanisms that provide accurate information to the public in a timely manner.
- Working to involve civil society organizations and individuals in public policy discussions and decision-making processes, especially those related to sustainable development and human rights.

1) Goal 16: Right to press freedom and information, sustainable development goals, link: <https://bit.ly/3BLmhKf>

2) 15 foreign media outlets banned in Ethiopia, Africa news, February 01, 2023, link: <https://bit.ly/3MKMpLG>

3) Ethiopia: media regulator suspends Addis Standard, relief web, 16 Jul 2021, link: <https://bit.ly/3q0wTCm>

4) Ethiopia: 19 media workers detained in May as press freedom situation deteriorates, The International Press Institute, Jun 3, 2022, link: <https://bit.ly/422p2l4>

5) Ethiopia expels The Economist correspondent, Ahram Online, 16 May 2022, link: <https://bit.ly/3OrbwV2>

6) FEATURE-Six million silenced: A two-year internet outage in Ethiopia, reuters, SEPTEMBER 29, 2022, link: <https://reut.rs/42YIbpe>