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Human rights defenders must be given a platform to freely and peacefully assemble so that the most vulnerable in society are protected, as Clément Nyaletsossi Voule discussed in his [report](#), presented to the General Assembly on October 17, 2018. Voule's report focused on the links between the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association and the sustainable development goals (SDGs) in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda. While presenting his report, Voule noted that the achievement of the SDGs depends on those who express their voices. 'Contributions by civil society are vital,' he stated.

'It is up to States to create a safe, enabling environment for these voices,' he added. 'If these voices are restricted, services and goods for those most vulnerable are depleted.'

States responded to Voule's report. For example, Morocco agreed that civil society's contributions to the SDGs were undeniable, and the United Kingdom agreed to focus more efforts on protecting human rights defenders.

However, the conversation took a turn when the United States, instead of engaging with Voule's report, criticised Syria, Iran, Russia, Cuba, Nicaragua and China for their actions that violate fundamental rights to freedom of assembly and association, including torturing, detaining and even killing individuals in response to their civil activism and for developing laws that restrict the rights of NGOs.

The US remarks led to a line of responses from those States criticised. These States similarly did not comment on Voule's report.

'We were disappointed by the decision taken by some States not to engage constructively in the dialogue with the Special Rapporteur. We urge States to ensure they use these spaces and dialogues to work towards actual human rights protections on the ground,' said ISHR programme manager Tess McEvoy.

Despite the conversation's turn, it is important to note that Voule's report made a strong, explicit link between civil society and the SDGs. Civil society's voice is paramount to improving people's lives, and it is vital to protect that voice.

During the dialogue, the US also noted the resolution on freedom of association and assembly it will present during this session of the Third Committee for the first time. 'After the US withdrawal from the Human Rights Council, we query whether presenting this resolution at this session may be part of attempts by the US to establish a foothold in the human rights scene in the Third Committee,' commented ISHR's New York Director

Eleanor Openshaw.

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