

Statement at 31st session of the UN Human Rights Council

Item 6: UPR Outcomes – Australia

Thank you Mr President. This is a joint statement.

Australia has a vibrant and highly effective civil society. This is reflected in the fact that Australia received 290 UPR recommendations, the majority of which were advocated by a coalition of over 190 NGOs, ably coordinated by the Human Rights Law Centre and the National Association of Community Legal Centres.

We welcome Australia's substantive response to these recommendations, including a commitment to elaborate a National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights and to develop a process for monitoring Australia's progress against UPR recommendations. Continued close engagement with human rights defenders and other civil society actors is crucial to the integrity and impact of these processes. We warmly welcome Australia's strong support for the draft Human Rights Defender resolution being considered at this session in that regard.

We regret, however, that Australia has merely noted or will not further consider a range of UPR recommendations in an approach which seems incoherent with the pillars of Australia's Human Rights Council candidacy for 2018.

That candidacy commits Australia to promote good governance and stronger democratic institutions. This should include legal frameworks and mechanisms to ensure that universal rights are protected and enforceable, and that remedies are available to victims. It also requires robust mechanisms to promote implementation and follow up on UN human rights recommendations. Consistent with this commitment, we urge Australia to accept recommendations to develop a national Human Rights Act, to extend the mandate of the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights to include monitoring and follow up on UN recommendations, and to ratify the Optional Protocol to ICSECR.

The candidacy also commits Australia to support strong national human rights institutions. This commitment starts at home. It should include accepting the UPR recommendation to restore adequate funding to the Australian Human Rights Commission, and appointing Age and Disability Commissioners through public, transparent, merit-based processes that are fully compliant with the Paris Principles.

Finally, respect for freedom of expression is a vital pillar of Australia's Human Rights Council candidacy. We are gravely concerned at regression in this area since the UPR. Just this week, there are two separate Bills before state parliaments that curtail the right to peaceful assembly. The Human Rights Law Centre's landmark 'Safeguarding Democracy' report documents recent legislative and policy measures which undermine community sector advocacy, threaten press freedom and whistleblowers, and severely restrict the right to protest, particularly against business interests. We call on the government of Australia to carefully consider and implement the recommendations of this report, which has very widespread civil society support.

Thank you.