



Reclaiming Local Civil Society space

The world is facing tremendous challenges. The recent scenes from the US and other states around the world demonstrate the rise of the populist and authoritarian leaders and highlights the deterioration of democratic institutions and lack of transparency and accountability. The CIVICUS State of Civil Society Report 2020, confirms that “The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated, accelerated and further exposed crucial global challenges that came to the fore in 2019: restricted civic and democratic freedoms, economic policies that fail most people, widespread exclusion, limited international cooperation and a failure to follow the science and act on the global emergency of climate change.....Civil society’s role is more vital than ever. CSOs, always on the frontline of crisis response, provided healthcare, food, shelter and other essentials to those in need. The kind of solidarity that civil society nurtures and mobilises, from the local to the global levels, proved critical in getting people through the crisis”.

A study published by the EU in 2019 on Societies outside Metropolises: the role of civil society organisations in facing populism recommends that “Concrete and consistent actions over time are needed in order to empower civil society organisations in those regions to deliver their mission and play their role of “speaking on behalf of those who are underrepresented and advocating for the marginalised, and to educate and create a kind of genuine bond between different communities”. However, the way the international aid sector is working at present is contributing to instrumentalising local CSOs as subcontractors rather than acting as independent civil society actors catering to the real needs and priorities of the community and encouraging their governments to act as the duty-bearer and protect people’s fundamental rights. The Covid19 pandemic has extensively and adversely impacted the aid architecture, further marginalising local civil society at a time when they are at the forefront of the response, be it Covid19 health response or economic or other crises caused during this period, leading at times to denying lifesaving assistance to population facing natural disasters or protracted crises.

The challenge is not to get back to old ways, but to push forward to a new normal: a post-pandemic world that is fairer and more equal, and in which rights are widely recognised. Given the global changes the aid sector needs to radically accelerate change. The instrumentalization of local actors to serve global agenda is no longer acceptable. There is an urgent need for building trust with the South and the need for decolonization of aid. In any case, it is unlikely that Western aid, channelled through the expensive UN, international NGOs and Western private contractors, can continue to provide a global social safety net at a time when a global economic depression will rapidly expand needs and distress. This requires the mobilisation of many more actors, for which the dominating and controlling attitudes of International aid agencies are a big obstacle.

In 2021, Alliance for empowering partnership (A4EP) will continue its work to advocate for independent and accountable local civil society organisations that promote a society based on democratic principles, equality, and social justice in line with Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They should be leading voices, playing central role in influencing and shaping local, national, regional and international policy through engaging communities and citizen in their countries. They should be active actors in holding stakeholders to account for better and accountable delivery on policies, development, relief and humanitarian assistance, particularly in aid-recipient countries. We will continue to campaign for a locally led approach and for the space and resources for communities to decide on their own priorities. We will maintain and strengthen the solidarity amongst a network of local CSO leaders so we can provide a robust evidenced based information from the ground to influence national and international policies and practices that work for them.

We urge the international donors and national governments to provide the space and resources for local civil society to thrive, so they can work with the government to improve the living standards of their citizen and to complement the development and humanitarian efforts. We urge the UN agencies to play their rightful role in promoting human rights, channel their resources to seek durable solutions, address funding gap through operational cost efficiency and providing resources and support to sustain local civil society to be able to do its work, instead of competing with them. It is time to decolonise aid by stopping the aggressive fundraising tactics

of Northern agencies in the global South and taking over coordination and decision-making space in Southern countries through their country offices. A4EP is further concerned that local actors, rooted in communities, are facing existential crisis due to the corporatisation of the aid sector.

Over the many years, the International NGOs have made good contribution in strengthening capacity of local civil society organisations. It is time for them to leave the space for local actors to take their rightful place in their country and regional policy and decision making processes. Independent local and national CSOs can't thrive if the government, donors and/or INGOs keep marginalising them within their own contexts. Local CSOs need to play their rightful part to achieve large-scale progress to complex problems and to improve governance and accountability in their own societies. This includes working with the citizens in the country to track and make aid more accessible and accountable to the community.

There are many good processes that have been initiated at international levels to address some of the challenges however A4EP is concerned that we need to keep up the momentum to translate policy discourses into practice and avoid vested interests slowing down progress. It requires an open mind, open heart and open will to change mind-sets and frameworks, build more trust in the local civil society and commitment to an empowering and equitable partnerships between donors and recipients and with intermediaries. The communities in countries pay a heavy price when they do not take part in making the development decisions and do not receive timely humanitarian assistance so that they could bounce back to a better future.

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