



Reclaiming Local Civil Society Space January 2021

The world is facing tremendous challenges. Recent scenes from the US and other states around the world demonstrate the rise of populist and authoritarian leaders and highlight the deterioration of democratic institutions and lack of inclusion, transparency, and accountability in governance. The CIVICUS State of Civil Society Report 2020 concludes 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 2019 study published by the EU 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 currently operates most instrumentalises local and national CSOs as subcontractors for their agendas, rather than supporting them 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, at a time when the lifesaving assistance to population facing natural disasters or protracted crises is most needed. Local organisations are facing further marginalisation 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.

The challenge now is not to get back to the 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 external actor agendas is no longer acceptable. There is an urgent need to build trust with the South and to decolonise and democratise 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, the Alliance for Empowering Partnership (A4EP) will continue its advocacy for independent and accountable local civil society organisations that promote a society based on democratic principles, equality, and social justice, in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Civil society organisations should be leading voices, playing a central role in influencing and shaping local, national, regional and international policies through engaging communities and citizens in their countries. They must 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. A4EP 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 evidence-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 their governments to improve the living standards of their citizens 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 gaps through operational cost efficiency and provide 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 an existential crisis due to the corporatisation of the aid sector.

Over many years, INGOs have made good contributions to strengthen the capacities 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, UN 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 keep up the momentum to translate policy discourses into practice and avoid vested interests slowing down the progresses. 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 can bounce back to a better future.

Members of the Alliance for Empowering Partnership



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