Civil society at the crossroads: citizen action and social change

Track 1 - Changing nations through citizens

ORGANISER: Anabel Cruz
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MODERATOR: David Brown

RAPPORTEUR: Julie Vespoli

PRESENTERS:
Anabel Cruz, Director, Institute of Communication and Development (ICD), Uruguay
Jackeline Kabahinda, Director, EASUN Centre for Organisational Learning, Tanzania
Brian Pratt, Director, International NGO Training Center (INTRAC), United Kingdom
Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay, Director of Department, Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), India
Andre Soteri Procto, Researcher, Birmingham University, United Kingdom
David Brown, Harvard University, United States of America

Format: Roundtable discussion

Time and date: Thursday 6 September 11.30am-13:00 PM

Number of participants:
- Women: 21
- Men: 21
Total: 42

Presentations and discussions’ summary

The session started by asking the following questions:

1. The CIVICUS State of Society Report declares that there is a disconnect between social movements and formal civil society. With that in mind, what should be done to remedy the disconnect?
2. Are there crossroads (challenges, restrictions) emerging in the countries you work in? And if so, what are the implications for both practitioners and policy-makers?

Looking at the case of the Chilean student movement, Anabel Cruz stated that the student movement clearly is civil society. She stressed that it is necessary to reconsider the value of volunteerism as a
channel of participation and civic energy. Political parties have to reconsider their work, and in some instance they might have to face irrelevance.

In the case of India and Hanna Hazare’s anti-corruption hunger strike, Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay related that historically in India, civil society organisations had almost ridden off the middle class, accusing them of being insensitive to government reforms and poverty. However, in a historical shift, individual citizens had joined Hanna Hazare movement. This led to a revisiting of civil society’s position, and highlighted the potential of the middle class to influence reform. Hanna’s movement has created a new space for policy debate in the public domain.

Considering the case of the Trader’s Association movement in Uganda, Andre Soteri Procto talked about the issue of the connectedness of civil society: civil society faces extinction if it doesn’t connect to the issues of the people it stand fors. We all need each other; the issue of collaboration and common agendas are significant in terms of intervening for development.

Key lessons learnt, best practices, tools, recommendations:

- We must ask ourselves, do crossroads really exist and is civil society really multiple? How does this social energy transform itself in real systemic change, and how can NGO actors build on it, rather than kill it?
- Formal CSOs are working to promote transparent governance but they must also practise this model. It seems to be the responsibility for CSOs to act as the bridge between citizens and government organisations.
- Social movements, informal CSOs and CSOs don’t need to compete; they need to work on forging unified efforts for change.
- We need to change the way we look at success: social movements are making positive contributions and they should be recognised by the development community.
- We are too preoccupied with the concrete results of lobbying; we should value what happens in the social and civic arena.

Follow up of this initiative:

Brian Pratt, Director, International NGO Training Center (INTRAC), United Kingdom, suggests that participants follow this crossroads discussion through www.pria.org or www.intrac.org.

| Key recommendations |

To strengthen citizens’ actions and remove the barriers to people achieving sustainable change, we should:

- build bridges with various groups.
- create inclusive institutions that responds to changes in society.
- promote collaboration rather than competition among all actors, including CSOs and social
movements.
- re-envisage the basis for success: not all actors have the same role to play in creating sustainable change.