Reflection for a new social contract
– August 2012 –

Why are we talking about the need for a new social contract at the CIVICUS World Assembly 2012?

Many of CIVICUS’ members, and other stakeholders in our global civil society network, report multiple difficulties in their attempts to interact with and influence other groups and forces in society. At the global level, they tell us that in the main multilateral institutions don’t make adequate provisions to listen to and take seriously civil society voices. At the national level, many civil society organisations relate experiencing increasing restrictions from governments and other forces that limit their ability to do their work adequately. And at the same time, the world has recently seen the emergence of a new wave of protest movements that clearly articulate a sense of acute dissatisfaction amongst many people with the present arrangements that govern their lives. Put together, this tells us that at the 2012 CIVICUS World Assembly there’s a need for an urgent conversation about the understandings and systems that underpin the relationships between different forces in society – in short, that it’s time to discuss the need for a new social contract.

1. What is, in simple terms, a social contract?

In simple terms, a social contract is an implied set of rules that govern the relationship between individuals and social structures. Different groups and forces in our societies impact on our lives in different ways, creating a series of relationships of interdependence between people, the government institutions which make up the state, the actions and movements of people which make up civil society, the private sector and other social groups and forces. The social contract does not imply any written or codified set of rules, but ideally these unwritten rules should foster an environment in which all people are free to exercise their rights.

a. A social contract between citizens and the state

A social contract governs an individual’s relationship with the state, and with other sources of power in society. The social contract would ideally set expectations of what an individual can expect the state to provide, what rights an individual, as a citizen, has in relation to the state and other sources of power, and in turn what a citizen’s responsibilities are towards the state.

b. A social contract between civil society, the state and the private sector

At an aggregated level, if we look at the different clusters of social and political actors in a society, which include government, civil society and the private sector, the social contract also means the rules of engagement and the means of negotiating the balance of power between these different sectors. This applies at the global as well as national level. Ideally a social contract should balance the roles of different sectors, enable a sharing of power, and establish the ground rules of positive cooperation that is respectful of human rights.
c. A social contact between individuals in a society

The social contract also suggests a series of implicit rules that moderate the relations between individuals within a society and that provide the basis for interactions, cooperation and respectful relationships.

Any one individual is therefore in reality involved in a series of social contracts that govern interactions between other individuals, agencies and power-holders.

2. What is wrong with the current social contract and why do we need a new one?

The last two years have seen a great wave of mass protest and citizen-led dissent in countries in many regions of the world: countries home to over half the world's population saw mass protest in some form in 2011. This tells us starkly that people are dissatisfied with the conditions in which they live and the existing arrangements of their governance. Protest has raised issues of inequality, powerlessness, humiliation and lack of citizen voice. That so many people are reporting such grievances and reacting to them tells us that many citizens are dissatisfied with the conditions in which they live, and that there is not a functional, healthy set of rules of engagement and power balances between citizen and the state and other holders of power: in short, that there is not a healthy social contract. If the majority of people felt that the collective rules governing their lives effectively served common interests, we would not witness such a scale of dissent. If a working social contract was in place, we would not be seeing so many protests on the streets and, in many countries of the global north, such a high level of rejection of conventional politics at the polls.

At the level of interaction between individuals, many societies are increasingly characterised by alienation, violence and the breakdown of normal relations. In many countries, urbanisation, changing working patterns and the rise of new communications technologies, amongst other factors, are challenging and eroding previously firmly entrenched extended family and social structures, suggesting again a need to invest in new spaces, processes and ways of working that bring people together in new ways.

At the national and global levels, many civil society organisations are expressing increasing dissatisfaction with governance arrangements which privilege the voices of the private sector, powerful elites and governments, including in national and multilateral processes, and feel that their voices are being squeezed. Governments in many countries are placing more restrictions on civil society that make civil society’s work harder. Recent multilateral experiences like the Rio+20 meeting show how hard it is for civil society voices to be taken seriously compared to government, large private sector and other elite voices. Many believe that the current structures of global governance are failing humanity, with one key failure being the repeated inability of multinational structures and processes to stop violations of human rights.

In the many countries of the world that have experienced economic crisis, the reaction of governments has been to cut back on public spending, while privileging and protecting financial institutions. This again implies a breaking of the implied social contract and the rules of engagement between different sectors, and suggests a bilateral renegotiation is underway between government and the private sector that excludes civil society and citizen voices.

3. How can civil society contribute to developing a new social contract?

A new social contract should have as its aim the protection and promotion of people’s rights to work together and seek progress towards the common good. This can only be done by redressing existing power imbalances and the claiming back of power by citizens and their organisations from governments, large companies and other elites. Civil society – understood here as the actions of people to associate and seek change in the public sphere, and the
associations people form to do this – needs to play the lead role in defining new rules of engagement and new relationships. Civil society forms the arena where people debate, argue, advance different viewpoints, negotiate and attempt to achieve consensus, and as such it provides the legitimate space where alternatives and solutions can be articulated, supported and advanced.

Civil society organisations, as the most structured and organised part of civil society, need to provide the spaces where debate can take place and offer multiple platforms for consultation and citizen participation. Civil society organisations do this best when they combine to work together, including across different types of civil society organisations and with informal groupings, to offer a plurality of routes for citizen participation, and when they are prepared to take on the realities of existing power imbalances.

4. What will be done at the CIVICUS World Assembly to help define a new social contract?

The overarching theme of the 2012 CIVICUS World Assembly is defining a new social contract. All discussions of the World Assembly, involving close to a thousand people, including leaders from civil society and representatives from government and businesses, will develop focused recommendations on defining the global principles and parameters for a new social contract.