



DHANANJAYAN SRISKANDARAJAH

Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah is Secretary General & CEO of CIVICUS. He has previously held senior posts at the Royal Commonwealth Society, Commonwealth Foundation, and Institute for Public Policy Research. He writes regularly on international migration, economic development and civil society. He can be found @civicussg on Twitter and Facebook.



MANDEEP TIWANA

Mandeep Tiwana is the Head of Policy and Research at CIVICUS. He specialises in legislation affecting the core civil society freedoms of expression, association and assembly. Prior to joining CIVICUS in 2008, he worked on a range of human rights and social justice issues in India. Mandeep has a keen interest in issues related to civil society space, development and international relations.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the imbalance between northern and southern civil society organisations (CSOs) in their engagement at international forums. It delves into some of the internal and external factors that inhibit southern CSOs from playing a bigger role in global governance discussions and in shaping the agenda of intergovernmental organisations. Finally, it makes some recommendations towards creating a “multipolar” civil society in line with the contemporary realities of a changing world order.

KEYWORDS

Multipolarity – Civil society – Emerging democracies – Global governance



This paper is published under the *creative commons* license.

This paper is available in digital format at <www.surjournal.org>.

TOWARDS A MULTIPOLAR CIVIL SOCIETY

Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah and Mandeep Tiwana

In a speech delivered at Stanford University in 2013, UN Secretary General, Ban ki-moon dubbed the present a time of “Great Transition.” He urged his listeners to become global citizens as “we move increasingly and irreversibly to a multipolar world order” (KI-MOON, 2013).

Almost everywhere we look — from economics to demography to air travel to innovation — this shift to the so-called “emerging” markets is palpable. But when it comes to the civil society landscape, the transformation is less visible. Many of the largest, most visible and most vocal civil society organisations (CSOs), especially those working explicitly on human rights, were founded in the global north and remain headquartered there. While some of these organisations are decentralising (e.g. Amnesty International) or have relocated to the south (e.g. Action Aid International), the overall pace of transformation in civil society seems much slower than in other areas. Indeed, there is a real possibility that northern CSOs will continue to have a higher profile, disproportionate influence and control over resources in the civil society sector for some time yet, bucking the trend of restructuring of global power relations.

This is a particular concern for the organisation we both work for. Headquartered in Johannesburg, South Africa and with members all over the world, CIVICUS was founded twenty years ago to nurture a healthy and independent civil society, especially in places where freedom of association and participatory democracy were under threat. One of our key priorities is to empower civil society in the global south to play its rightful role on the local *and* global stages.

In our experience, there is a range of internal and external factors that limit the ability of southern CSOs to engage on the global stage, whether it is to raise the issues that matter to them most, to influence international affairs or to access funds. In this article, we discuss some of these impediments, as well as some opportunities to enhance southern civil society’s participation in global debates. We argue that the global human rights agenda would be strengthened significantly if southern civil society actors themselves do more to look beyond their national boundaries and become global citizens in today’s interconnected, multipolar world.

Notes to this text start on page 517.

1 A disabling operating environment

The first major impediment is the very conditions that many southern CSOs work in. Despite international law and constitutional protections, the legal and policy environment for CSOs remains a contested space in much of the developing world. CIVICUS' 2013 State of Civil Society Report highlights this trend, which is most prevalent in the Global South, although there has been regression in civil society freedoms in developed countries, too (CIVICUS, 2013). Given the ground realities, it is thus very difficult for CSOs in the south to shine on the international stage when their position at home remains tenuous due to restrictions imposed on their activities.

For instance, in Zambia, NGOs are required to obtain approval of their areas of work from the government-dominated NGO Board as well as harmonise their activities in accordance with the national development plan (MORE THAN..., 2013). Bolivian NGOs and foundations are required to contribute to the economic and social development of the country taking into account guidelines laid in national plans and sectoral policies (ERÓSTEGUI, 2013). Algeria's law on associations limits the scope of activities for civil society groups to "professional, social, scientific, religious, educational, cultural, sports, environmental, charitable and humanitarian domains," thereby indirectly preventing them from undertaking activities relating to human rights, democracy promotion and gender equality (NGO..., 2013). Indonesia's law on mass organisations prevents CSOs from propagating ideology that conflicts with "Pancasila," the state philosophy (INDONESIAN..., 2013). Nigeria's anti-gay law potentially criminalises the entire community of progressive civil society groups and human rights defenders by making it illegal to support gay clubs and organisations (NIGERIA..., 2014). In Saudi Arabia's extreme example, civil society groups don't even have legal cover for their programmatic and fundraising activities through an associations law (CIVIL..., 2013).

So, a first priority for strengthening the global role of southern CSOs will be to ensure that they operate in a stable legal and policy environment in which they are free to expand the scope of their activities without unwarranted state interference.

2 The challenge of raising funds

A second challenge relates to the inability of southern activists and CSOs to receive financial backing from local sources, often forcing them to look abroad for funding. This, in turn, often reduces their credibility locally (e.g. they are accused of being "foreign agents") or locks them into hierarchical relationships (e.g. where they become local "implementing" partners to northern CSOs, who control the policy and purse strings). Notably, the reliance on foreign funding also gives governments powerful leverage over groups that expose corruption and state complicity in human rights violations.

India's Foreign Contributions law requires CSOs to get official clearance before they can receive funds from international foundations and development agencies. Because the authorities have discretion to designate an organisation as

being of “political nature” and thereby prevent it from receiving foreign funds, a number of human rights groups in the country remain in a perpetual state of uncertainty with regard to their future activities (RAZA, 2013). In Ethiopia, human rights advocacy groups that previously relied on international funding due to scarcity of resources within the country have been severely decimated due to the restrictive charities and societies law, which puts restrictions on various types of activities for organisations that receive more than 10% of their funds from abroad (ETHIOPIA..., 2012). Russia’s government has gone so far as to require CSOs receiving funding from abroad to designate themselves as “foreign agents,” a derogatory term that undermines their credibility with the public (MOVES..., 2012).

Despite these challenges, there are two potential reasons for hope. The first is an expectation of sharp growth in local philanthropic bases in the global south due to an improvement in standards of living. A recent report by the Charities Aid Foundation argues that philanthropic giving by the expanding middle class in the global south holds great potential to transform societies especially because the share of developing countries in global GDP will exceed that of the traditionally rich industrialised OECD countries by 2030 (after purchasing power parity adjustments) (CHARITIES AID FOUNDATION, 2013). Another reason for optimism is that some funders, including official agencies and private foundations, are starting to recognise the need to fund southern CSOs directly, rather than through northern-based intermediaries. Initiatives such as NGOsource¹ make it easier to verify the credentials of southern-based organisations and campaigns such as Fund the Front Line² are trying to build donor interest in directly funding the activities of smaller CSOs on the ground.

3 Barriers to access global governance institutions

A third key factor that inhibits southern CSOs from engaging in global governance debates is their lack of access to major intergovernmental institutions, the overwhelming majority of which are based in developed countries. On a practical level, discriminatory visa regimes and the high cost of the travel and accommodation at these locations act as a major deterrent for southern CSOs. Hence the participation of southern CSOs when major debates take place at the United Nations (UN) and other intergovernmental organisations can be lopsided vis-à-vis northern CSOs. A report on the role of civil society in global governance published by Bertelsmann Stiftung estimates that a third of the 3345 ECOSOC registered NGOs with a specific headquarters were based in Europe and a further quarter in North America (FRIES; WALKENHORST, 2010). Despite being home to three-quarters of the world’s population, Africa and Asia only accounted for a quarter of UN-accredited NGOs.

The role of cultural capital, which can be described as the concentration of knowledge and access with regard to global governance institutions by a handful of well-resourced CSOs, most of whom are often based in the global north, cannot be understated. Over time, these CSOs and their staff (some of whom are employed just to do UN liaison) build up the cultural capital that gives them the access to

policymakers and opinion-formers. Cultural capital elevates some sections of global civil society whilst purposefully or inadvertently discriminating against citizens from a particular geographic location or class, or simply those who cannot travel often enough to New York or Geneva to build relationships with key actors. In a recent perception survey carried out by CIVICUS, CSOs based in Africa expressed much lower levels of satisfaction with the CSO outreach of intergovernmental organisations in comparison with their peers in Europe (CIVICUS, 2014). Despite efforts to improve the working practices of these institutions, there is widely agreed to be a bias in favour of those citizens who have been socialised in similar structures.

Although, this situation is a product of broader historic forces, it nevertheless contributes to reinforcing the status quo. It is also a reminder that any radical democratisation of whose voice is heard in global governance processes will require a concerted effort—by civil society itself and by intergovernmental institutions—to overhaul who gets access.

4 Preoccupation with domestic issues

Finally, the most disappointing factor of all is the fact that, for many CSOs in the south, the vastness of the challenges at home and in their immediate vicinity is the overwhelming priority—so much so that they find it hard to have the time or resources to engage on global issues. Additionally, resources from international donors to support initiatives on human rights and social justice are usually for in-country programmes, as opposed to influencing global debates and agendas. Thus involvement in international agendas remains restricted to a relatively limited number of well-resourced southern CSOs.

In our own experience, we have seen how difficult it can be to build southern-led campaigns on human rights issues. For example, when the Ugandan government was in the process of passing the draconian anti-homosexuality law, we wanted to canvass African CSOs to speak up against this, in part to provide an African-led complement to the countless western voices that were speaking up on this issue. We managed to get a respectable 25 signatories to our open letter to President Museveni (OPEN..., 2011) but it was clear that very few CSOs had the time or inclination to respond.

This example also demonstrated the need to find new ways in which southern-based civil society can speak up on issues beyond its borders. Many of our colleagues are concerned about what is going on in other parts of the world but are reluctant to issue public condemnations, often with the familiar caution that this is not the “African way” or the “Asian way.” Yet, when it comes to attacks on universal human rights, there is a positive obligation on all of us—including southern civil society actors—to speak up. We may well need to find more nuanced and appropriate ways, but we still have to speak up.

Additionally, we need to engage our governments on their foreign policies. Far too many southern civil societies have given their official representatives a free pass to carry out actions undermining human rights at international forums. Every regressive statement and every negative vote should be exposed at home to public

scrutiny. An effective way to enable this is to build national coalitions focusing on international affairs. CIVICUS is a founding member of the South Africa Forum for International Solidarity (SAFIS), a group of CSOs and activists committed to positively influencing South Africa's foreign policy to mirror constitutional principles and the values that underpinned the struggle against apartheid. In the coming years, we hope to be able to incubate such like initiatives where they don't exist and learn from experiences where they do.

In summary, we know the global civil society landscape needs to change to reflect the emerging multipolar world, and that more southern voices need to be present in the public sphere, in international governance discussions and so on. But this will not happen unless we redouble our efforts.

First, a good beginning would be for southern CSOs to prioritise advocacy at international forums such as the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for a better and more enabling legal and regulatory framework which also encourages local philanthropy through tax breaks and other fiscal incentives. The UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) recently organised a discussion in its March 2014 session on a safe and enabling environment for civil society, which will be followed by a report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights later this year (25TH SESSION..., 2014).

Second, we need to place greater emphasis through media and public awareness campaigns on the centrality of human rights and social justice so that attention can be focused on these areas by southern foundations and philanthropists who traditionally support initiatives related to poverty alleviation, education, health, etc., where results are more tangible. A number of southern countries, including emerging democracies like India, Brazil and South Africa, are in various stages of setting up development partnership agencies and financial institutions to support development. It is critical that southern CSOs are involved in focusing the agenda of these institutions towards the protection and promotion of human rights as well as ensuring that the resources from these institutions are also channelled to southern civil societies and not just government departments.

Third, southern CSOs need to make a concerted push towards becoming global citizens in today's inter-connected world by developing programmes on regional and international governance. They need to equip themselves with the skills and experience required to negotiate select international arenas which have been the traditional preserve of international NGOs based in the north. There has to be a realisation that the local is increasingly being impacted by the global and that it is necessary to engage in the region and beyond to do full justice to an organisational mandate.

In another twenty years, when Sur publishes its 40th edition and CIVICUS turns forty, let's hope that civil society is as multipolar as the political economy is likely to be.

REFERENCES

Bibliography and Other Sources

- 25TH SESSION of the Human Rights Council focuses on the importance of the promotion and protection of civil society space. 2014. **United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service**. March 25. Available at: <<http://www.un-ngls.org/spip.php?article4412>>. Last accessed in: Aug. 2014.
- CHARITIES AID FOUNDATION. 2013. **Future World Giving**: Unlocking the potential of global philanthropy. February. Available at: <https://www.cafonline.org/pdf/Future_World_Giving_Report_250212.pdf>. Last accessed in: Aug. 2014.
- CIVICUS. 2013. **State of Civil Society Report 2013**: Creating an enabling environment. Johannesburg, South Africa. Available at: <http://socs.civicus.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/2013StateofCivilSocietyReport_full.pdf>. Last accessed in: Aug. 2014.
- _____. 2014. **State of Civil Society Report 2014**: Reimagining Global Governance. Johannesburg, South Africa. Available at: <<http://civicus.org/images/stories/SOCS%202014.pdf>>. Last accessed in: Aug. 2014.
- CIVIL society demands legal status in Saudi Arabia. 2013. **CIVICUS**, Press Releases, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2 Oct. Available at: <<http://www.civicus.org/media-centre-129/press-releases/1894-civil-society-demands-legal-status-in-saudi-arabia>>. Last accessed in: Aug. 2014.
- ERÓSTEGUI, Susana. 2013. **Pilot study on Enabling Environment Bolivia**. La Paz: Unión Nacional de Instituciones para El Trabajo de Acción Social (Unitas), Sept. Available at: <http://www.ccic.ca/_files/en/what_we_do/2014_02_20_Bolivia_Case_Study.pdf>. Last accessed in: Aug. 2014.
- ETHIOPIA: Human rights work crippled by restrictive law. 2012. **Amnesty International**. 12 Mar. Available at: <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/news/ethiopia-human-rights-work-crippled-restrictive-law-2012-03-12>>. Last accessed in: Aug. 2014.
- FRIES, Tom; WALKENHORST, Peter. 2010. **Sharing Global Governance**: The Role of Civil Society Organizations. Washington, DC / Gütersloh, Germany: Bertelsmann Stiftung, December. Available at: <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/bst/en/media/xcms_bst_dms_33090_33091_2.pdf>. Last accessed in: Aug. 2014.
- INDONESIAN NGO law a setback for freedom of association. 2013. **CIVICUS**, Press Releases, Johannesburg, South Africa, 19 Aug. Available at: <<http://www.civicus.org/index.php/en/media-centre-129/press-releases/1822-indonesian-ngo-law-a-setback-for-freedom-of-association>>. Last accessed in: Aug. 2014.
- KI-MOON, Ban. 2013. Remarks at Stanford University. **UN News Centre**, Palo Alto: California. 17 Jan. Speech at Stanford University. Available at: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/speeches/statments_full.asp?statID=1748#.UzKq200U_IW>. Last accessed in: Aug. 2014.
- MORE THAN 100 groups call on Zambian President to halt NGO law. 2013.

- CIVICUS, Press Releases, Johannesburg, South Africa, 31 Oct. Available at: <<http://www.civicus.org/media-centre-129/press-releases/1931-more-than-100-groups-call-on-zambian-president-to-halt-ngo-law>>. Last accessed in: Aug. 2014.
- MOVES to stifle civil society in Russia demand strong international action. 2012. CIVICUS, Press Releases, Johannesburg, South Africa, 10 Aug. Available at: <<http://www.civicus.org/media-centre-129/press-releases/1019-moves-to-stifle-civil-society-in-russia-demand-strong-international-action>>. Last accessed in: Aug. 2014.
- NGO Law Monitor: Algeria. 2013. **The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law**, 12 Sept. Available at: <<http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/algeria.html>>. Last accessed in: Aug. 2014.
- NIGERIA: Anti-LGBT Law Threatens Basic Rights. 2014. **Human Rights Watch**, New York, 14 Jan. Available at: <<http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/01/14/nigeria-anti-lgbt-law-threatens-basic-rights>>. Last accessed in: Aug. 2014.
- OPEN Letter to Ugandan Parliament: CIVICUS calls for the immediate and complete withdrawal of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in Uganda. 2011. CIVICUS, Open Letters, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2 Aug. Available at: <<http://www.civicus.org/media-centre-129/open-letters/557-open-letter-to-ugandan-parliament-civicus-calls-for-the-immediate-and-complete-withdrawal-of-the-anti-homosexuality-bill-in-uganda>>. Last accessed in: Aug. 2014.
- RAZA, Danish. 2013. Is the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act a tool to curb dissent? **Firstpost**, India News, 23 May. Available at: <<http://www.firstpost.com/india/is-the-foreign-contribution-regulation-act-a-tool-to-curb-dissent-810003.html>>. Last accessed in: Aug. 2014.

NOTES

1. Available at: www.ngosource.org. Last accessed on: 19 Aug. 2014.
2. Available at: www.theguardian.com/fund-the-front-line. Last accessed on: 19 Aug. 2014.