





SOLIDARITY FUND CONVERSATION SERIES

FORMER MAG MEMBERS: TANYA & MOHSIN






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Mohsin Khan is the founder of TransHelp: Democratizing Affordable, Accessible Health and Legal Aid for Marginalize Community

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Tell us a little bit about you and your role as a MAG.

Tanya: I joined the MAG as a youth (under 30) member of the team in 2019, and my mandate got renewed for a second term until 2022. I remain highly appreciative of how CIVICUS “walks the talk” and includes young voices in key strategic inter-generational discussions and actions such as the CSF. After my appointment, I received multiple messages of appreciation from my youth peers for CIVICUS’s recognition of youth capacity in decision-making processes. As a MAG member, I examined how the CSF funding practices can better serve our civil society movements. I critically explored the contradictions in “funding” social transformation, especially in the face of increasing political repression, anti-rights agendas, and rising corporate power. With the team, I built collective strategies that support thriving, robust, and resilient civil society movements.

Mohsin: Over the last several years, I have successfully led grant programs, built capacities of individuals and partner organizations and conducted research on program effectiveness across Asia and Africa with multilateral and bilateral organizations. As an inaugural Member of the Advisory Group, I assisted the Secretariat in preparing a strategic plan for CSF and MAG and ensured that we adhered to CIVICUS and CSF’s mission and vision. I ensured transparency in selecting the right partner from the global south and built their capacity to implement and scale up their projects to create an impact. As a MAG, I have been privileged to support many innovative projects bringing legislative reforms in human rights, notably preventing child sexual abuse in Mongolia and promoting mass-scale civic journalism in Kenya, among others.

Could you please tell us about your experience with CSF’s decision-making process?

Tanya: Given that we were the pioneer MAG team, we had to set up the framework for evaluation of submissions from scratch – this was both a privilege and a challenge. With the support of the CIVICUS secretariat, we improved upon the system with every submission cycle.

We explored, exchanged, and strengthened knowledge about how civil society movements attract, organise, and use the resources they need to accomplish meaningful change. Through the mentorship sessions with grantee-partners and meetings with applicants, we strengthened connectivity, reciprocity and solidarity across the diversity of civil society movements. We endeavored to build new visions and amplify existing realities and experiences of civil society governance, justice, and accountability by centering emancipatory models, practices and ideas of organizing civil society.

Mohsin: The CSF decision-making is built on participation, where each member and secretariat participated in designing the selection criteria after deliberation and dialogues. The process remains very intense yet flexible, and we revised the criteria each time during the funding cycle as we witnessed or foreseen a challenge from the applicant side. As a grant writer by myself, I often face challenges of writing long and sophisticated (or I would say “bureaucratic”) proposals, e.g., introduction, complicated problem scenarios, MEAL framework and budget matrix. We made the process very easy for the applicants, who were largely non-technical people, to answer very straightforward questionnaires so that we could understand their concerns and make the decision quickly. We also ensure they can submit their grant proposal in different formats if they face any writing challenges.

What was the most significant, in terms of learnings, from being part of the MAG?

Tanya: Before joining the MAG, I had only read and researched about funding for civil society movements and the ways that money moves against them, sometimes from the same institutions. Being part of the MAG allowed me to gain practical experience in taking active steps on the path forward based on solidarity and contributing to reshaping the funding ecosystem. It was eye-opening to delve deeper into the transformative resourcing strategies at CIVICUS to directly reach civil society movements that are faced with overwhelming challenges brought also by an unsustainable global economic system.

Mohsin: I love this process of participatory grantmaking, initiated by CIVICUS and led by MAG, which I was part of. I learned many things. I was coming from a bilateral organization, where we trained for years to follow strict rules to fund and “evaluate” grantees, or “recipients” of the “aid” we were providing. Initially, I was very strict, however with the diversity of the MAG, and by listening to applicants and other colleagues' arguments, I gradually changed my strict “donor mindset”, and I started to see grantmaking decisions from the “applicant perspectives”. Similarly, the interaction with the secretariat, the leadership and MAG has been phenomenal, especially by being part of the strategic plans and reporting processes, which enabled me to learn more about the civil society and advocacy culture and to build my own capacity in the manifold.

From the applicant's and grantees' side, I learned that organizations and individuals in developing countries need more technical support, like the one provided by the CSF and MAG. While they are very passionate and innovative in their projects and ideas, they still require skills to craft those ideas, and groups like the MAG can help them. Last but not least, during my time at the MAG, there were many regions in which we were not able to get as many applicants, i.e. from the Caribbean or Southeast Asia and MENA region, primarily due to less outreach, language or technological barriers. While MAG is represented by these regions, efforts could be made to reach potential candidates in these regions or areas in the future.

What did you enjoy the most and the least?

Tanya: I attended ICSW 2019, and this platform helped me grow my network. I am still in touch with most of the people I have met there, and we have collaborated on multiple projects together thereafter.

Unfortunately, there could not be any in-person gathering for ICSW 2021 due to the pandemic. While technology did enable us to pursue our work online, the isolation sometimes made it difficult to center the hope, optimism, healing, and radical imagination that civil society organizations inspire.

Mohsin: I really enjoy the whole process of grantmaking, from developing voting and rating criteria to dialogue and heated debates to interviewing applicants and supporting them throughout the grant cycle. I didn't like our inability to meet in person due to the pandemic and participate in the yearly workshops led by the secretariat, as it is crucial to connect, build network and momentum in the long run.

From your experience, what challenges do activists, small or informal organisation, groups, and movements continue to face? How do you think these challenges can be addressed? In other words, what kind of support do you think civil society needs the most?

Tanya: There are contradictions in “funding” social transformation, especially in the face of increasing political repression, anti-rights agendas, and rising corporate power. Rising fundamentalisms and fascisms, which have attempted to shutter space for civil society organizing for decades, try to push their agendas and gain power. In this context, resourcing for social justice will need to change. This is about shoring up social movements in the immediate term and fundamentally re-thinking our larger economic systems. In this moment of uncertainty, funders such as the CSF have a vital role in supporting civil society movement-based responses to the pandemic's social, political, and economic effects. This moment underscores the absolute need for agility and self-defined strategies based on communities' realities and contexts.

Mohsin: I found several challenges while evaluating proposals, i.e.:

a.Lack of information on different grants and resources—many individuals and organizations have limited knowledge and access to information on various funding opportunities. MAG and CIVICUS members can help bridge this informational gap, organize workshops, and disseminate through Social media to increase outreach.

b.Limited capacity to write proposals followed by strict donor rules, which impede these small organizations from not applying. i.e., financial report or audit reports, MEAL system, reporting. While we cannot change the mindset and rules of bilateral or multilateral donors, efforts can be made at our end to ease the proposal and grantmaking process, and we led a successful example in this area, which is needed to be further scaled up.

c.Governance challenges in the host country, i.e. opening bank accounts or receiving grants (even small amounts from CSF), were a big challenge for many of our partners. Advocacy efforts to push these governments and institutions, personal accounts and other forms of redressed mechanisms can be followed to speed up the process while ensuring transparency.

What progress has the MAG achieved/made during your term in realising and addressing these challenges mentioned above for the Solidarity Fund?

Tanya: We have amplified funding practices that center on civil society activists' own priorities and engage a diverse range of funders and activists in crafting new, dynamic models for resourcing civil society movements, particularly in the context of closing civil society space. In the wake of the pandemic, we have strived to strengthen, expand, and prioritize grants to communities most affected, including those working at the intersection of civil society activism and economic justice and movements led by the priority constituencies of CIVICUS. We endeavored to make the application process as minimally burdensome as possible and have the fastest turnaround. This crisis is only a symptom of wider systemic problems in how societies and economies are governed and the Earth is exploited. We were flexible in terms of how grantee-partners can use the grant to counter the pandemic to ensure that civil society movements and communities that hold the solutions to transforming our world are resourced to put these solutions into practice.

Mohsin: We made the application process as easy as possible to avoid challenges for grantee-members when applying. Therefore, our criteria and questions were very short and simple, and we ensured they were easy to understand to make the application process quick. We also ensure that applicant could submit their grant proposal in different formats if they face any writing challenges and email submissions that could be completed offline.

What advice would you give to the new MAG and future CSF grantee-members?

Tanya: Expand and deepen your collective thinking and organizing to advance just solutions and systems that embody values and visions for resisting oppressive systems. Document, demonstrate and disseminate methodologies that will help identify the realities in our diverse communities of activists, small and informal organisation, groups, and movements. Build the power of civil society by naming, celebrating, amplifying and contributing to building momentum around experiences and propositions that shine a light on what is possible and feed our collective imaginations

Mohsin: For new MAG, I would encourage them to be flexible, understand the country and applicant's context, and get as much information as possible to make a "wise decision". In addition, talk to the secretariat team for any misunderstanding on the process, consult former MAG (I am happy to help in any form), participate actively in meetings, and speak. It is essential to share your thoughts openly if you feel it is important. Connect with each other and with applicants/partners in your field, this will help you make a social impact as we aim to work together.

For the future CSF grantee, be innovative in your ideas, conduct some research on past grantees, what type of projects were successfully granted, which area of concern was most granted, familiarize yourself with the grant-making process, reach out to former grantees, seek help from them, so your application is strong. Last but not least, be focused, and don't be too ambitious, take small steps, and then make partnerships and networks to scale up your project.