Civil Society at Crossroads

**Thematic Track:** Democratic Space

**Activity Format:** Engagement Workshop

**Number of participants:** Men: 25 Women: 28 (Total: 53)

**Time and date:** September 12th 11h-12h30

**Presenters:**

- Rajesh Tandon, President, PRIA (Society for Participatory Research in Asia), India
- L. David Brown, Senior Research Fellow, Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, Harvard University, USA
- Cristien Temmink, Facilitator of Learning, PSO, Netherlands
- Brian Pratt, Executive Director, INTRAC, United Kingdom

**Abstract**

While witnessing the major economic and political changes taking place around the world today, many questions have become apparent. What are the challenges for civil society? Are local and indigenous civil society actors gaining visibility or disappearing altogether? How do citizens organize, raise their voices and hold governments accountable? Is the space for civil society shrinking or growing? How does civil society engage with the private sector? Many of these questions have been debated in the past, but it is time to renew our dialogue to reflect what is a new world.

This session invited participants to share stories and experiences from their own backgrounds relating to a central question: “What are the roles, capacities, contributions and limitations of civil society in a changing local and global context?”

This “Civil Society at Crossroads” initiative is intended to transcend the boundaries of the development discourse and define civil society’s contribution to the process of democratizing governance and societies in pursuit of inclusion, equity and justice. Welcome!

**Key presentation items**

The principal objective of the activity was to help us face the challenge of thinking about civil society differently. The activity focused on exchanging between participants, but the speakers set the stage before hand.
Rajesh Tandon introduced the workshop by reminding us that as a civil society, we have to ask ourselves some difficult questions. For example: What are the roles of indigenous, local and grass-roots organisations? Why do a large part of them not identify themselves as civil society?

Mr. Tandon defined people that are part of civil society in these words : Active citizens who act in a collective manner and who engage with issues that extend beyond them. So as part of this global civil society, there are two questions that we need to ask ourselves: What role do we want to play and what role do we want the others around us to play?

Cristien Temmink then talks about the situation in the UK civil society. The country is going through a massive economic crisis because they have been living off the backs of chinese peasants for 10-15 years. They are still thinking about international development as a transfer of resources from rich to poor – but this conception is wrong. She thinks that this vision is going to have an end and that post-aid is already happening. The country needs to reinforce its civil society, grow from past paradigm about international systems. She finished by saying that the crossroads we are at as a civil society is part of larger crossroads that society is facing.

L. David Brown ended by briefly painting the picture of civil society situation in South Africa. In a very short period of time, South Africa has gone through incredibly rapid and fundamental changes. In very recent past, the civil society was very mobilized and organized to take power from the Apartheid regime, and now we are back in an era where there are public protests, maybe even more than during the apartheid era! He talks about the fact that it is important to stop at the crossroads and re-imagine ourselves. To learn to tell the story differently and reconnect with ourselves.

Were diversity, equality or gender issues raised or tackled?

☐ Yes (please develop) : A women (participant) talked about the fights for women’s rights in her country and how it was difficult to connect between grassroot groups and NGO groups, because both do not have the same needs. We want to help women democratize and to involve themselves in society, though on the other hand, their basic needs are not met.

Reflexions from the audience (summary)

Some general reflexions :

- Contributions from civil society are not always positive. There is discontent in our society, because government doesn’t respond to our needs, and cuts services, and sometimes, unfortunately, this leads to revolutionnary movements in society such as anti-immigration movements and this is seen as the civil society.
- Social Media is changing the way people are getting involved, this is affecting the media industry and the way people are joining them.

- How do you build interest in sustained action when people who act in sudden action are not necessarily interested in sustaining this?

Some specifics reflexions:

- In the Tcheque Republic, there is a transformation in the way we think of international aid. Before, we looked at it as more of a way of giving things (food, supplies, money), and now we realize that we can measure the help brought to a country when they don’t need us anymore.

- Norwegian perspective: we are facing more and more demands from donors to become professionalized in all sorts of ways. Are we disconnecting from our own people and citizens and what they think? Because we are trying to adapt to donors requirements so in some ways become too professional.

- Denmark: We find it very difficult to think of self-organized groups. What comes to mind is young people, they are self-organized youth groups but they are not part of organizations.

**Key lessons of the session**

- Non Governemental Organisations and people from government have to learn to speak the same language if they want to be able to work together.
- The crossroads we are at as a civil society is part of a larger crossroads that society is facing.
- The big question of this crossroads is how do we reconnect and re-engage?

**Contact person and organisation**

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