

International Civic Forum

Solidarity in Times of Scrutiny

Supported by



National Endowment
for Democracy
Supporting freedom around the world

Dates 29 October 2019

Location GIZ Office Ethiopia, Addis Ababa

Summary of Discussions

The *International Civic Forum 2019* took place in the context of the 11th Global Perspectives Conference of the International Civil Society Centre ('Let's make Lemonade – Legitimacy and Impact in Times of Scrutiny') and brought together approximately 40 representatives from civil society and partners. The overall theme was 'Solidarity' as part of the Centre's initiative of 'Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in a Divided Society', and aimed to create the starting discussion for the development of a 'Solidarity Playbook' for international civil society organisations (ICSOs) and partners. The basis for this discussion was a research report on case studies on ICSO solidarity and coalition response mechanisms, commissioned by the Centre (report and presentations attached).

The Forum sessions were structured in line with the findings of the report and included panels on:

a) ICSO responses and b) Coalitions of Solidarity, and subsequent group sessions on:

- 1) The ideal country coalition
- 2) Solidarity at and between local and global level
- 3) Engagement with citizens and core constituents.

A next steps session focused on creating momentum and a core group to guide the development of the Solidarity Playbook, to be launched towards the end of.

Key Points from the Discussions

The following summarises the very rich discussions and contributions from the panels, breakout groups and in plenary (NB. unattributed under the Chatham House Rule).

Panel 1: How are ICSOs responding to the legal restrictions and the attacks on our legitimacy?



- Panelists provided some background on the three case studies represented, including how staff and local CSO communities reacted, how many resources were needed to counter the attacks, and how *ad hoc* coalitions protected space to speak up and protest.
- A major tension is between articulating protest and solidarity, and the risk to maintaining operational presence. Also, local 'rootedness' mattered when being confronted with accusations of being 'foreign agents'.
- A triad of active and smart communication (e.g. directly to potential supporters and the public), building solidarity networks, and active campaigning could be a good way to structure responses.
- The linkages beyond local contexts matter. For example, US restrictive legislation on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (Global Gag Rule) indirectly impacts conditions in Southern countries. In turn, civil rights violations can be countered both locally and through involvement of the highest political levels, e.g. the UN special rapporteur. Are we using enough of this local – global connectivity?
- Other actors that are worth considering for solidarity mechanisms are: the media, donors, and building alliances with local communities.

Panel 2: Coalitions of Solidarity – what works, how and when?

- Two case studies of coalition building in times of government attacks were presented on the panel (Hungary and Nigeria) and were complemented by the insights of a large federated ICSO and perspectives from the audience on the Ethiopian context. The latter is in a highly transitional state after years of repression, and a recent political shift widening civic space, with questions on sustainability still open.
- The case studies highlighted some commonalities of how networks of solidarity developed, despite being highly contextual with regards to the actual attacks. After initial recognition these attacks were not just limited to certain themes and sectors, networks were formed to enhance joint communication and action, and mutual support.
- A common theme was the development of a permanent 'alert' mode, even in quieter times, where networks prepared for things to come. This, of course, affects operations as well as staff of organisations. Networks provided psychological support and the feeling of not 'being alone'.
- Insights from the ICSO representative, complemented by the audience, confirmed that there is no protection by being a large player or working on apparently less 'politicised' mandates. Not doing advocacy seems not to be an option, and the support by resource-rich organisations to the partners of networks is essential. At the same time, large service delivery organisations may have stronger access to communities and possibility to mobilise grassroots support.
- While the gap between global ambitions (SDGs) and local realities seems to widen, solidarity networks can bridge these levels and create parallel mobilisation.
- There is strength in diversity of members but sometimes tensions can lead to 'coalitions within the coalitions' (some facing existential threats).



Breakout Group 1: The ideal country coalition

- There is no ideal blueprint, as context matters so much. However, there are essential elements of country coalitions that matter. Some of these entail:
 - Diversity is crucial!
 - Unity of purpose/commonality of interest
 - Needs to add value to its members
 - Openness is important – don't avoid the conflicts.
- Dimensions of power matter in country coalitions – money, relationships, brand. Imbalance is often visible between local and global organisations, as the former are often supported (financially) by the latter. So there needs to be open recognition of such imbalances, and avoiding leadership structures related to resources. Rather: everyone has something to contribute.
- Recommendations include: to make an intentional decision to build a successful coalition; and to enhance its ability to be rooted in that country.

Breakout Group 2: Solidarity at and between local and global level

- The group expanded the discussion into four dimensions altogether: local level, national level, regional level, global level, role of platforms and global networks.
- The local level brings several strengths like: citizen engagement, offline capacities, credibility, first-hand data, local mobilisation. Challenges include: narrow perspective, not always being representative, lack of time and resources, being issue-focused.
- National-level solidarity is characterised by: knowledge of political context, united voices including representing the un-represented, recognising and using the interface with governments, building bridges to local and global actors, and promoting rights-based ideology. Challenges include: the question of representation, disunity across sectors, the need to be low-key advocates, and possible divisiveness among members.
- Regional-level opportunities are: awareness-raising, building networks of champions, strategic litigation and funding. The role of CSOs at regional levels include: amplifying national crises to regional levels, solidarity mechanisms to countries in crisis, relief and support to human rights defenders and the championing of universal rights in regional contexts.
- At global level, the bird's eye perspective, the ability to provide technical, financial and HR support is coupled with good access to institutions, global influencers, media, etc. These are valuable assets to develop real partnerships on solidarity and legitimacy.
- Lastly, global(ised) networks and platforms play a distinct role. They already exercise structural collaboration and good information-sharing, bringing quality and diversity together. In order to be influential, they need to have a critical mass and the ability to develop collective voices, provide learning and division of labour. Through economies of scale and



their strong legal standing, they provide pooled resources, shared evidence and leverage. Challenges, however, include: unsustainable membership models, the need to balance governance and the potential for members to compete over the direction and intensity of action.

Breakout Group 3: Engaging with citizens and core constituents

- The rich group sessions benefited from a number of real-life experiences of successful (and failed) citizen engagement scenarios, e.g. around a Women's Resource Centre in Sudan, or with young girls' engagement through a large child rights organisation. There was a lot of caution in the discussions over recommending best practices, highlighting that such engagement strategies require lots of patience, time and a long-term approach of developing trust and understanding.
- A 'big listening exercise' was recommended both to understand the real issues that the communities are facing, and how they perceive CSOs or ICSOs coming into their contexts.
- Plenty of sensible themes matter, like traumatised, rights violations, trust, and CSOs working in such contexts need to bring psychological support services into play as much as other dedicated resources to enable a sustainable dialogue.
- There is no way of manufacturing or engineering citizen's engagement. Rather, one needs to consider questions like: 'What is healthy and mutually beneficial engagement, rather than 'extractive'? Are you willing to invest longer-term? What happens after?' Sometimes you galvanise and give local CSOs courage and solidarity (in a role as a 'body shield'), at other times you could be cannibalising them and should 'get out of the way'. You need the acumen to know where to let action and engagement be led, or where you need to lead it (back, front, side).
- It is the process that matters, sometimes you can't measure impact, or it is over a much longer term. And sometimes citizen engagement with CSOs can be a non-starter. As a saying goes: 'It can be like taking the oxygen out of the fire' – the minute an ICSO walks into the room, the fire goes out.

A Call to Action

In the final session, action points from all previous sessions were discussed and important connections between different actors were made. The Centre proposed a way forward to develop the Solidarity Playbook in 2020, and identified a number of people and organisations interested in contributing (or wanting to be kept involved).

To follow up on any of the action points and or connect with relevant actors or working groups, please contact Miriam Niehaus, Project Manager (Solidarity Playbook): mniehaus@icscentre.org