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POLICY PAPER

DEVELOPMENT NEEDS CIVIL SOCIETY - THE IMPLICATIONS OF CIVIC SPACE FOR THE SDGs

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Key findings:

- I. The shrinking space of civil society hinders social and -economic development and hinders achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- II. Restrictions on civic space prevent Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) from engaging in policy formulation, monitoring rights, raising awareness, championing the voices of vulnerable populations, and from building partnerships.
- III. When civic space is limited, development risks excluding voices and increasing social distrust. Ultimately, this increases inequalities and makes development less sustainable.
- IV. Civic space is essential to provide transparent and verifiable information. If objective data is absent due to shrinking civic space, trust in official data and political performance is likely to decrease.
- V. Weakening of civil society may increase a permissive culture of corruption among elite groups without sufficient checks and balances. Not only could this erode trust in governance, but it could also trigger significant economic, food and political crises.
- VI. Overemphasis on huge infrastructure projects and economic growth increasingly competes with the discourse of inclusion and thereby puts the key SDG principle of “leaving no one behind” at risk.

Civic space is changing

The study was carried out in 2017 and 2018 by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) for the ACT Alliance. It examines civil society in its role and function of enhancing service delivery, collecting information and evidence, analyzing data, holding governments to account, advocacy, shaping public policy, ensuring the voices of vulnerable are considered, defending human rights and contributing to global governance.

Drawing on four country case studies carried out in Brazil, Cambodia, Nepal, and Zimbabwe, and on 12 desk-based country studies, the report analyzes the pivotal role civil society has played in achieving the SDGs. Examples from the collected case studies show how civic space contributes to the achievement of particular SDGs.

Civic space is changing in terms of who participates and how. Dwindling civic space limits liberal human rights actors while widening the influence of right-wing, extremist and conservative groups. The growth of digital space has reshaped civic space for all actors and helped unruly protest movements to take up more space.

Political elites close civic space as part of national struggles over political and economic power. Conflicts over the use of natural resources and land have been found to be key reasons why civic space is restricted.

Civic space as a pre-condition for SDG progress and ‘leaving no one behind’

Without a fully engaged civil society, the SDGs are bound to fail. This is the main conclusion of the research and case studies done by IDS. Shrinking civic space is likely



to halt or reverse progress towards reducing inequality, insuring inclusion, and improving sustainability, because it is often precisely those marginalized who are at great risk of being 'left behind by development'. Examples show how restrictions on civic space have already affected and are likely to further impact adversely on the number of SDGs, as outlined below. The study concludes that for development to be sustainable over time and for the benefit of all, civic space is needed.

Most governments have strong incentives to demonstrate that they are making substantial progress in their development goals. Their legitimacy depends on that performance. For this reason, governments have numerous instrumental or pragmatic reasons for promoting civic space:

- 1) External scrutiny by social actors and independent analysis is essential for highlighting the impacts of economic and social trends and for identifying groups at risk of being left behind or adversely affected by policies. Civil society participation in the design, monitoring, and evaluation of public policy is thus of vital importance. Without civil society activism, policies may go unchecked, with no available avenues for potential alternatives to be raised. Policies developed in open and transparent spaces are potentially better policies.
- 2) Citizens - in particular marginalised groups - must be able to hold the providers of basic public services accountable for equitable delivery of services such as education, health, water and sanitation, housing, safety and justice. Governments routinely struggle to

improve the quality of public services, but shrinking and closing civic space and violating fundamental freedoms excludes citizens from addressing challenges in the delivery of basic public services. The 'leave no one behind' principle commits governments to reaching the most marginalised populations. Their voices must be heard, and their active participation as agents of change needs to be promoted.

- 3) Clamping down on information-sharing and scrutiny of public affairs has counter-productive effects, as public trust is undermined when governments control the flow of information. In the absence of independent scrutiny and analysis of official statistics, methodologies and sources, public experts and development partners are often suspicious of official data.

SDG specific findings

SDG 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere

Shrinking space allows elites to ignore how economic crises exacerbate conditions that are more likely to affect poor and marginalized people. Poverty is most visibly measured in lack of income and resources but should also be understood more broadly in its full social dimensions. Poverty is also related to the quality or distribution of social services. Independent voices of affected populations play an important role in holding national governments to account for corrupt or incompetent practices, lack of quality and distribution of public services, as well as for functionality allocation and transparency of disaster and emergency relief. Civil society champions these voices and ensures that grievances are shared openly. Limiting civil society participation and curbing social protection programmes in **Brazil** has reduced the likelihood of pro-

poor development and an increase of 1.5 million people living in extreme poverty has been observed.

SDG 2: Zero hunger

The closing of civic space reduces the affected population's influence on food and agriculture policy-making. Civic participation in policy-making related to food security becomes limited. Among rural communities, the absence of strong civil society organisations potentially increases land and resource grabbing and adversely affects food production and livelihoods of subsistence farmers and indigenous people. When civil society and the media are unable to access or report on the effects of national food crises, particularly in remote or conflict-affected regions, ruling elites are insulated from the political and human consequences of these crisis and experience no pressure or imperative to act. Ending hunger and achieving food security is therefore very dependent on civic space. In **Zimbabwe**, restrictions have weakened civil society and it has been unable to hold the government to account over its failure to prepare for and respond to macroeconomic shocks. This situation has reduced capacities for rural resilience and increased vulnerability to disasters, often resulting in a dependence on food aid, which in turn is used for political and corrupt purposes against marginalised groups.

SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Onerous regulatory and administrative restrictions, often through hidden barriers, make it harder for women's organizations to push for policies and programmes which are gender-equitable and empower women and enable them to deliver services themselves. Women who are



living in poverty or are otherwise disadvantaged are particularly affected, as they benefit the most directly from civil society advocacy and pro-poor services, particularly those related to sexual and reproductive health rights. Women's organizations and human rights activists are weakened and sometimes violently attacked as they face deliberate stigmatization and backlash from right-wing groups, resulting in threats to their personal security and restriction of their activities.

Progress for all SDGs depends on the achievement of gender equality. Strong and persistent voices advocating for women and girls' rights are essential for eliminating the root causes of gender discrimination in all spheres of life. In **Cambodia**, for example, the suppression of labour and labour movements adversely affects women, as 90% of all workers in the garment industry are women.

SDG 8: Promote sustainable economic growth and decent work for all

Closing civic space is linked to the exploitation of workers and the related suppression of labour rights, including the freedom of association and collective bargaining. Closed political systems generally tend to be poor environments in which to protect the rights of workers. Closed political systems restrict the capacities of the political opposition, civil society and the media to accompanying affected workers in raising issues of exploitation and unsafe working conditions. The absence of social dialogue with unions and lack of civil society involvement in equitable and sustainable economic growth often lead to macroeconomic, food, and political crises. Remarkable GNP growth sometimes occurs in closed economies, encouraging the view that civic space is unnecessary

for development. China, Rwanda and Ethiopia are well known as countries where rapid growth and poverty reduction has taken place in tightly controlled civic space. In countries where power is dominated by a small elite group, even if that group seems to adopt broadly 'developmental' strategies for economic growth and human development, such elitist patterns of growth and poverty reduction are unlikely to be widely shared or sustained over time. Exclusion and suppression may be costly for ruling elites. This was recently seen in **Ethiopia**, when the ruling coalition was forced to create space for groups whose protests about land and other policies had been gradually gathering momentum.

SDG 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries

Shrinking civic space is likely to generate unequal and exclusionary development policies and practices, with a significant risk of leaving the most vulnerable behind. Civil society actors are at the frontline, challenging inequalities and discrimination. Extreme income inequality is rising dramatically. Without civil society activism to highlight conditions and policies that affect the unequal distribution of wealth, economic growth is likely to entrench and deepen these divisions even further.

When civil society actors are silenced, it is often the most disempowered who lose their voice, and the powerful whose voices are amplified. This results in mounting material and political inequality. The pledge to 'leave no one behind' and to 'reach the furthest behind first' is consequently hindered by the closure of civic space. In **Brazil**, crackdown of civil society is disproportionately

affecting rural communities, and it is likely that the impacts of reversing civic freedoms will undo earlier progress in reducing economic and social inequality.

SDG 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems

Civil society actors working to protect the environment, forests and biodiversity are under particularly direct attacks and face hostilities that prevent them from acting in a number of countries around the globe. There has been a year-on-year increase of almost 14% in the rate of deforestation in Brazilian Amazonia, taking it to its highest level since 2008. At the same time civil society was experiencing an increase of suppression.

SDG 16: Promote peace, justice and strong Institutions

SDG 16 plays a double role in the development impact of closing civic space. Firstly, shrinking space results in worsening development outcomes as measured by SDG 16, with respect to violence, human rights violations, abuses of the rule of law, social and political exclusion, and the wider prospects for peaceful, stable, and just institutions. In the cases compared here, half of the SDG 16 targets showed clear and measurable signs of deterioration as a result of specific restrictions on civic space. Government efforts to restrict civic space have an immediate and measurable impact on the role of civil society to build trust where societies are polarized. Secondly, SDG 16 outcomes are also related to the capacities of civil society actors to safeguard public institutions which are guided by SDGs on poverty and hunger, work, livelihoods, and the environment, among others. Actions against civil society activists undermine the fundamental freedoms of



association, expression, assembly and protection as well as the capacity of civil society actors and human rights defenders to scrutinize government policies. Building and safeguarding effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels is therefore also a precondition for realizing the SDG agenda.

Recommendations to national governments

Progressive realization of the SDGs will not succeed without civil society. National governments must thus acknowledge the wider public benefits of civil society engagement with the 2030 agenda. There are no realistic alternatives to building constructive partnerships with civil society. In strengthening civic space in their countries, national governments must therefore:

- Promote and protect enabling civil society-related laws, regulations, policies and practices consistent with rights that are internationally and regionally agreed upon, in consultation with domestic civil society;
- Ensure space for civil society in developing initiatives, in part through respecting CSOs' right to initiate development programs;
- Recognize that CSOs may have priorities, plans, and approaches that are distinct from those of governments;

- Include CSOs in the development, reform and monitoring of laws, regulations and policies that target CSOs and civil society;
- Have regular, transparent, accountable and inclusive consultations with diverse representation from civil society on the determination, implementation and monitoring of SDG country priorities;
- Ensure the application of the rule of law, to prevent human rights abuse and effectively protect human rights defenders against harassment and violence, taking account of special circumstances for women, and other vulnerable and marginalized groups;
- Build constructive equitable partnerships in implementing the SDGs with civil society, including independent civil society actors, vulnerable and marginalized groups, NGOs, social movements and community groups, the media, thinktanks, and researchers.

Recommendations to International Providers of Development Cooperation

There is an urgent need to build a strong case for civic space as a precondition for achieving the SDGs. This should be a key priority for providers of development cooperation. Recommendations include:

- Emphasize the need for sustained political leadership

in promoting open civic space and understanding the challenges of changing civic spaces, including uncivil space and the misuse of digital space;

- Make use of SDG 17 as a platform to demonstrate civic space as a pre-condition for advancing Agenda 2030;
- Show that an open society and inclusion are necessary for sustainable growth as a counter-narrative to the visions of economic growth in closed societies;
- Promote funding modalities for initiatives that showcase the important role of civil society in the achievement of the SDGs;
- Ensure that foreign, security, trade and migration policies have no negative impact on human rights or civic space in other countries;
- Examine the relationship between economic growth and inequality to understand how growth is compatible with the “leaving no one behind” principle;
- Promote the expansion and defence of civic space particularly for marginalized groups in international organisations, fora and negotiation processes;
- Develop early warning and action systems which include systematic monitoring by embassies of fundamental freedoms, laws and rules for civil society organisations, in particular in countries where civil society is facing widespread attacks.

Full study: https://actalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ACT_SynthesisReport_CivicSpace_2019_Final_WEB-Copy.pdf