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New Report looks at Civic Space in Times of COVID

Shrinking civic space, "muted" civil society, could be among the biggest rights challenges in post Covid-19 times.

- 18 countries share the impacts of COVID-19 on civil society in new report
- Urgent need to develop indicators at national and international levels to measure government's efforts to protect civic space and fundamental freedoms
- "Build Back Better" must include an enabling environment for civil society

Paris, 15 July, 2020 -- Civil society is facing serious restrictions on its freedom to engage, express itself and to be heard, according to a recent report by Forus and the Asia Development Alliance (ADA), two civil society networks working at the global and regional levels. The eighteen civic space case studies in this report, launched on 15 July, highlights many of the challenges faced by civil society organisations around the world since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The report, "**Realising the potential of Goal 16 of the 2030 Agenda to promote and protect civic space**", illustrates that some of the most immediate impacts of the pandemic have been to exacerbate and deepen existing problems faced by civil society organisations (CSOs) in terms of civic space and enabling environment.

"Civic space was already under pressure before the pandemic," says Sarah Strack, Director of Forus. "A vibrant and independent civil society is vital to fulfil its role in the implementation of the SDGs. Progress will be correlated to the extent to which meaningful civic space will be secured at local, national, regional and international levels".

A key trend in almost all of the eighteen case studies included in the report is unwarranted state restriction on civic space - on the freedom of expression, assembly and association of civil society in many countries around the world.

“One of the most important contributions that this report makes is to highlight the extent to which civil society is under sustained attack in many countries around the world, and space for meaningful participatory engagement is shrinking dramatically. The report provides numerous examples of the dire situation in which many civil society organizations seeking to promote the 2030 Agenda find themselves. And the responses to COVID-19 in many countries has only made the situation worse as governments have opportunistically used the pandemic as a justification to further clamp down on the forms of civil society engagement that are indispensable if the SDGs are to be promoted effectively,” states Professor Philip Alston, Former UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights.

A global campaign involving Forus and a broad coalition of other stakeholders will call for new civic space indicators to be developed that will measure the efforts of UN Member States to “protect fundamental freedoms” in accordance with international human rights standards and national human rights laws.

“The report makes a major contribution by demonstrating the patent inadequacy of the current indicators that have been identified in relation to the monitoring of Goal 16 and spelling out the crucial steps that need to be taken if this Goal is to achieve anything like its full potential. In particular, it would be a huge step forward if civic space indicators can be developed which would systematically measure states’ efforts to protect fundamental freedoms in line with international human rights standards,” according to Professor Alston.

Censorship and Shrinking Civic Space

In contexts in which civic space is shrinking, targeting free speech can take various forms. This was notably evident during the COVID-19 responses of governments around the world, according to a number of case studies in the report.

In Cambodia, several journalists have been arrested or threatened because of their reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, a blogger on the Pacific island of Samoa was jailed for seven weeks for allegedly defaming the Prime Minister.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) and independent media groups have been cut off from funders and “muted” in many countries from Nepal to Colombia. Forus and ADA, along with many other civil society organisations, have regularly drawn attention to this trend. Despite such difficulties, CSOs around the world are actively responding to the COVID-19 pandemic by supporting populations affected by the lockdown faced with economic challenges.

“Building Back Better” and New Pathways

Despite shrinking civic space, the activism of civil society globally has been greatly enhanced by the possibilities that the internet and social media offer, according to the report. The internet is particularly targeted by authorities to curtail dissent, but civil society organisations around the world have used virtual spaces to become more vocal and exchange information to more efficiently defend offline space.

For the social recovery from the COVID-19 crisis to be sustainable and resilient, a return to ‘business as usual’ must be avoided. The “building back better” narrative and plans, however, must be comprehensive, covering all policy areas and creating more space for civil society in the development, implementation and monitoring of these plans.

“During COVID-19, the Danish multi-stakeholder 2030-Panel has been an active voice to promote and motivate the “building back better” mindset politically and in the public debate. It is especially in times of crisis that they have the opportunity to rethink and choose new pathways, and the Panel's goal is to convince and qualify Danish politicians to dare to choose the sustainable pathway out of the crisis,” says Sara Brandt, Political Advisor at Danish civil society platform Globalt Fokus.

Forus believes that progressive governments, international & regional institutions, philanthropic organisations and civil society now need to take bold steps to counter the shrinking of civic space and to develop global partnerships to tackle the issue.

The Forus/ADA report on civic space will be launched at a special event during the High-Level Political Forum on July 15.

[Click here for the Full Report.](#)

For a list of Forus events during the HLPF [please click here.](#)

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About Forus

Forus, previously known as the International Forum of National NGO Platforms (IFP/FIP), is a member-led network of 69 National NGO Platforms and 7 Regional Coalitions from all continents representing over 22,000 NGOs active locally and internationally on development, human rights and environmental issues. <http://forus-international.org>