

A crunch point for Indian civil society - what are the options?

Thursday 15 February 2018, by [Duncan Green](#) (Date first published: 29 April 2016).

We all know that the Indian government is increasingly tough on the CSO sector. But we should also ask ourselves: what roles and opportunities for CSOs exist in an economy that is growing 7% every year? Because my suspicion is that Indian civil society is a bit stuck in the zero sum games of the past and has not really responded to the new context.

In the rolling, 16 hour-a-day seminar that is a field trip, one topic kept coming up in my conversations in India last week. Many civil society organizations feel beleaguered. As the Indian economy booms, the foreign aid agencies on which many CSOs have come to depend are cutting back. The government is not only restricting 'civil society space' with shots across the bows of organizations like Greenpeace and the Ford Foundation, but stealing its best tunes with a series of 'campaigns' on everything from litter to building toilets.

Those campaigns are part of a familiar pattern - if you are building classrooms or responding to a disaster, you are Camara quotewelcome, but woe betide anyone who presumes to influence government policy. Echoes of Brazil's Bishop Helder Camara's famous quote.

The rise of service delivery is also driven by the money flowing through a recent law that obliges large companies to spend 2% of their profits on CSR. Many companies have set up charitable foundations to spend the money, and they are pursuing some pretty blatant PR tactics (and PR in this case does not stand for poverty reduction - one story in the papers while I was there showed how several foundations are only building toilets in the constituencies of ministers). They are also using the money to join the government campaigns - not much interest in advocacy there.

The sense of pressure and isolation contrasts with the overall dynamism of India's economy, growing at 7% a year, with the concomitant churn of 'creative destruction' as new companies rise and fall and a new middle class flexes its muscles (eg on anti-corruption).

So here's a hypothesis for my Oxfam India colleague Vanita Suneja to shoot down. What roles and opportunities for CSOs exist in a 7% economy that don't exist in a stagnant one? Because my hunch is that Indian civil society is a bit stuck in the zero sum games of the past and has not really responded to the new context.

What might a 7% agenda look like?

1. Tax: There's a lot of new money sloshing around the system, but it's largely bypassing India's poor people. Time for a focus on taxation, both overall tax take (still very low in India's case) and how it is raised (progressive or regressive? How many exemptions for the well connected?). Maybe start with the over 500 Indians featured in the Panama papers. A corporate 'tax heroes v tax zeroes' campaign would not only try to shift norms, but would presumably be welcomed by an Indian government trying to boost revenues.

2. Governance and Accountability: As new money enters the system, how is it being spent? Plenty of opportunity for budget monitoring, making sure the agreed amounts arrive in the villages and slums, rather than disappearing into the pockets of officials and cronies.

3. Religious Giving: the resources pouring into India's various religions as alms of one sort are another are vast. Yet how they are spent is almost totally opaque. Surely it is time to ask whether the kinds of transparency and accountability expected of CSOs or corporate CSR should apply to religious giving too?

4. India's footprint. Indian foreign investment is growing - time for Indian CSOs to partner with their colleagues in recipient countries on issues such as labour rights or land grabs?

So much for the themes, but I think a 7% agenda also points to different ways of working. In particular, with the increased fluidity and churn of non-CSO players, is it time to move from an approach which has emphasized 'horizontal' coalition-building between CSOs, to doing more work to build 'awkward alliances', finding common ground with fractions of the private sector, faith organizations or other tiers of government, working in multi-stakeholder initiatives etc?

And here's Vanita's response

Well, I disagree with Duncan on the basic hypothesis that civil society's agenda should be determined by the growth rate of an economy. Surely the agenda depends upon the issues a country is grappling with at a given point of time. The US is a stagnant economy with GDP growth below 2%, but at the same time it is the world's largest exporter of arms and second largest emitter of greenhouse gases. India is a 7% economy but amongst the top five importers of arms and 4th largest emitter of greenhouse gases. Hence an issue like disarmament or Climate Change is equally important to civil society in India and the US, despite their respective growth rates.

At the same time, the population below the poverty lines in the US and India are never going to be comparable despite India's growth rate. For India, issues such as poverty reduction; water management; exclusion; food security; access to health care and education are still very relevant. In fact more relevant when an economy growing at 7% competes and puts stress on the common resources such as land, water and public finance.

So for all of this economic activity, strengthening grassroots level of self-governance by the poor communities is still an agenda relevant for civil society in India. This is not to say that issues of macro governance such as tax evasion; last mile delivery of public finance; accountability are not equally important in the Indian context. But to say that civil society is stuck in zero sum games of the past and has not responded to the new context is wrong. Agenda setting in a country like India will fall into the trap of a zero sum game if strengthening governance at the local level is abandoned in favour of only working on governance issues at the macro level.

Working at the grassroots and strengthening local governance become all the more important when the government and private sector are pouring money into toilets or water management without good institutions on the ground; this is where CSOs should continue to play a role.

I do agree that at the same time CSOs also need to play a bigger role at the macro governance issues including how taxes are collected and redistributed by government so as they reach sufficiently at the local governance level and are effectively utilized by people's organizations.

On different ways of working, certainly as Duncan says, there is need to build 'awkward alliances' and be ready to work with fractions of the private sector, faith organizations or other tiers of

government work and not only be talking to horizontal coalition of CSOs.

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