

WEBINAR REPORT



The Role of South Asian Civil Society in the Times of COVID-19 Pandemic



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BACKGROUND

COVID-19 pandemic has impacted almost everyone around the world; however, its impact on the poor and marginalised has been profound. The fear of transmission of the virus through human contacts has forced many governments in the South Asian region to impose lockdown with varying degrees of measures.

As the economic activities came to a halt due to lockdown, the workers engaged in the informal economy took the hardest hit. Various governments in South Asian countries have announced some relief packages; however, without relaxing the eligibility for accessing those schemes and entitlements, many workers have not been able to access those benefits. In several South Asian countries, more than 80 percent workers are dependent on informal economy including agricultural, industrial, and service sectors and face the worst impact in the absence of adequate social protections.

The pandemic has completely exposed the vulnerability of our public health system, and about two months into the pandemic, the testing for the

disease remains abysmally low in most of the countries. It has, in a way, uncovered the unbearable inequalities in South Asian society. While the middle-class and upper-middle-class people have suffered from the lockdown, but it is the poor and marginalised, whose lives were already precarious, that have suffered disproportionately. The violation of human rights has been a significant concern during the pandemic, so far.

The role of CSO to reach out to affected communities has been remarkable. A study conducted in India by PRIA International Academy (PIA) underscores that civil society organisations active at the local level are playing a crucial role to support the pandemic affected communities. The support ranges from distributing food, water, personal protective equipment, personal hygiene materials; disseminating useful information about the pandemic, personal health and hygiene, rules and regulations of lockdown, government schemes and programmes for the affected communities; as well as creating livelihood opportunities for the most marginalised communities. A majority of the CSOs have planned to continue these interventions with the communities in the short- and long-term, as they understand that both the pandemic and

lockdown will have a far-reaching impact on the people particularly belonging to the most marginalised and vulnerable groups.

In this backdrop PRIA International Academy (PIA) and Asia Democracy Network (ADN) jointly organised the webinar to emphasise **the roles of civil society during the times of pandemic in the South Asian region**. Eminent founder leaders of various CSOs, thinkers and practitioners contributed to this discussion from the countries of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bhutan and India. Moderated by Dr. Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay (Director, PRIA International Academy, India) the webinar showcased presentations by Ms Shaheen Anam (Executive Director, Manusher Jonno Foundation, Bangladesh), Dr Vinya Ariyaratne (President, Sarvodaya Shramadan Movements, Sri Lanka), Jitram Lama (President, NGO Federation of Nepal, Nepal), Mr Jagadananda, (Founder-Mentor, Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD), India), Ms Sadiqa Salahuddin (Executive Director, Indus Resource Centre, Pakistan), Mr. Mohammad Zakir Stanikzai, Executive Director, Afghanistan Institute of Civil Society, Afghanistan and Ms. Tashi Pem (Country Director, Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation, Bhutan) who participated as panellists. Dr Netra Timsina (Convener, People's SAARC/South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE), Nepal) Mr. Harsh Jaitli, (CEO, Voluntary Action Network India (VANI), India), Md. Tahseen (Executive Director, South Asia Partnership, Pakistan) were the commenters and Mr Ichal Supriadi (Secretary General, Asia Democracy Network (ADN), Thailand) and Dr Rajesh Tandon (Founder-President, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), India) presented their closing remarks in the webinar. The webinar was attended by 87 participants.

The webinar focussed on the following questions:

- *What role civil society have been playing during the pandemic and what role it should be playing in the coming years?*
- *What challenges civil society face in playing these roles? What support civil society will need to meet these challenges?*
- *What role government, donors, and philanthropic foundations can play to enable civil society effectiveness?*

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- *Strengthen Community Based Organisations to help ease their operations at the local level.*
- *Advocate with government agencies to build a more cohesive relationship with CSOs in planning, implementing and monitoring of relief programmes.*
- *Increase regional cooperation amongst CSOs in the South Asian region for co-learning and collaboration to uphold the democratic way of life.*
- *Concentrated focus on addressing the existing inequalities in the society and working with the most vulnerable population groups on issues of human rights as well as livelihoods is a way for CSOs across the countries.*

INTRODUCTION

Introducing the significance of the webinar Dr Bandyopadhyay pointed out that COVID 19 and the subsequent lockdown has not only impacted the poor, marginalised and informal communities disproportionately but also led to the display of authoritarian tendencies by the state affecting the democratic way of life. Hence, it becomes all the more important to discuss the varied roles that the civil society, government bodies and philanthropic organisations including donor agencies can play in the context of the pandemic. He urged the discussants to highlight the challenges being faced by CSOs and the nature of support that is required to improve their operations.

Setting the context to the issue at hand, three questions were put forward for an audience poll. The first question put to poll was: *What support is your organisation providing to affected communities?* In response to this, 56 percent participants said that they were involved in the distribution of food relief, medicines, personal hygiene kits and personal protective equipment. Sixty-six percent said that they were disseminating information on the pandemic, 46 percent were disseminating information on government schemes and programmes. Thirty eight percent said that they were facilitating access to government schemes, and 48 percent were collecting information from the community and sharing this information with the

government functionaries. The poll reflected that an overwhelming role of CSOs in the current situations was disseminating information on the pandemic.

Second question put to poll was: *What challenges are CSOs facing in working with pandemic affected communities?* Seventy-three percent said lack of mobility of staff during the lockdown, 62 percent voted for lack of material and funds, 32 percent responded to lack of authentic information, and about 33 percent said lack of support from the government.

Third question put to poll was: *What kind of activities would your organisation like to undertake with the affected communities in the next 2-3 years?* Seventy-three percent participants said by promoting livelihood options and promoting the development of skills in a community. The other options that were chosen were generating awareness regarding the pandemic and its impacts, improving access to government schemes, and about 70 percent said advocacy and engagement with government.

It was requested of the participants to keep these poll results in mind as we discuss the role of CSOs in the current pandemic situation as well as to mitigate the aftermath.

PANEL DISCUSSION

What role has civil society been playing during the pandemic and what role should it be playing in the coming years?

Talking from the experiences in Bangladesh, Ms Shaheen Anam described the efforts of civil society in providing awareness and access to health and hygiene. Yet another significant role is aiding in the distribution of food and supporting the local governments in carrying out relief activities. However, the role and responsibilities of civil society as a watchdog is now needed more than ever, to maximise the effect of resources by ensuring the transparency and accountability of relief efforts. CSOs have supported government bodies in carrying out relief activities for the most marginalised sections of people that includes women-headed households, elderly people, persons with a disability, transgender people, and sex workers. CSOs have a greater responsibility towards preventing the deepening of existing inequalities due to the pandemic. She shared that multiple development

reports and analyses already indicate that the gains made in reducing poverty in many countries so far might be pushed back by many years. Even social gains that have been made in terms of women's empowerment, education, and healthcare stand a chance to be lost. Therefore, CSOs must focus on reducing the potential fallout from the pandemic as far as possible.

Dr Vinya Ariyaratne spoke about the pandemic and its effects within the context of Sri Lanka. Being an island nation, the country was able to take steps to contain the spread of the disease at an early stage, and the quarantine, lockdown, and extended curfew helped in containing the spread of the virus from the perspective of public health. Like many other South Asian countries, Sri Lanka is in Phase 3 of the pandemic, which is cluster/community transmission. However, the government has been able to identify the infected clusters, partly aided by their robust public healthcare system, which has evolved over the years due to the state's policy of universal healthcare coverage. In this context, CSOs have been responding as humanitarian organisations and taking care of the needs of the affected communities. CSOs in Sri Lanka focused on the needs of daily wage workers and in disseminating information early on regarding the risks of COVID-19, which was made easier due to the existence of communication networks created during relief efforts for other natural disasters. Social media was further used for the dissemination of information. He remarked that the role of CSOs during the pandemic must be to address their mandates since the pandemic has impacted all the systems in society. It is crucial to work towards supporting these systems, as well as considering alternative systems. For instance, CSOs must work towards a devolved system of governance, organise capacity building, and call for new forms of leadership.

Mr Jitram Lama shared that Nepal responded to the pandemic through timely lockdown and enforcement of social distancing measures. A committee was formed to ascertain the appropriate response to the pandemic, relevant policy documents and guidelines were prepared to mobilise stakeholders in response to the pandemic. The government of Nepal also utilised this plan to mobilise CSOs to address the effects of COVID-19 on women, children, senior citizens, people with disabilities, and vulnerable communities. The civil society also provided policy feedback, took part in the recuperation plan and mobilised local CSOs. The CSOs have worked to prepare and refine existing plans for dealing with the short-term and long-term effects of the pandemic, as well as to provide

immediate support to the ongoing relief efforts in the form of food, transportation, medical equipment, PPE, etc. Apart from working in coordination with local government, the civil society organised a call for action to encourage social distancing, following appropriate sanitation measures, and working against false information. The civil society also called for the government to ensure the provision of appropriate treatment, isolation, and relief efforts.

Ms Tashi Pem informed that the civil society in Bhutan has focused on spreading awareness, sharing information, doing critical prevention work, and identifying and reaching out to the most at-risk groups and individuals. Civil society volunteerism in Bhutan has been remarkable and inspirational; especially private sector donations and youth volunteers have emerged to be the crusaders in fighting with the pandemic. Online service provision, e-governance, and online education have also been innovative initiatives in Bhutan. She suggested that in the future, civil society should also work towards converting short term provision of relief, healthcare, and protective measures into longer-term plans. CSOs must utilise the existing momentum created by the pandemic to push for social protections, water programmes, and improving equitable development in the longer run.

Ms Sadiqa Salahuddin shared that civil societies have been active in Pakistan during the major disasters that have occurred over the last twenty years. These disaster management skills aided the civil society in scaling up their work and providing disaster relief to communities; however, the shrinking space of the civil society has seen a reversal during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Pakistan, while the new organisations and overseas citizens who have been trying to contribute to the relief efforts have focused on skill development and the creation of employment opportunities, they have not focused on empowerment or human rights. Such organisations and individuals also rely on the trust of religious figureheads, which further enables them to generate massive amounts of funds. In the current situation, CSOs have been engaged primarily in the distribution of food ration, improving physical infrastructure within isolation camps, bettering WASH structures and services, and supplying prepared food.

Mr Jagadananda shared that in India, one of the most distressful results of the lockdown has been the migration of daily wage workers on a large scale

across the country. In the past few months, there have been abrupt changes in policy, which has reduced the stability of governance. In this scenario, civil society has been attempting to support people in the form of food, shelter, and livelihood. In Odisha, efforts have been made to set up a citizens' feedback group to meet and discuss a common agenda to provide feedback from the ground level to the local government weekly. CSOs have tried to reach communities existing outside the ambit of the PDS system and other social security systems. There is also an effort to provide virtual psycho-social counselling, information dissemination, and virtual support to temporary isolation and medical centres. There have been drone-based efforts to sanitise areas, as well as influence national and local policymaking.

He suggested that the framework of action assumed by governments and the civil society must be redefined including the meaning of preparedness and mitigation, redefining the relationship of the civil society with local governments, and the meaning of basic services. An increased focus is required on sustainable agriculture, ensuring the availability of water, and effective implementation of a decentralised model of governance.

Md. Zakir shared that the civil society in Afghanistan is vast and varied, and have partnered with governments for implementing various schemes. CSOs have been extremely important during the pandemic for their work in distributing food, PPE, essential health services, and raising awareness regarding the prevention and effects of COVID-19. CSOs also monitor the functioning of the government and work to ensure that hospitals have the proper equipment and support that they need. However, the majority of relief efforts are concentrated in bigger cities and do not reach smaller towns and localities. He suggested that civil society can create a strong sense of communication and solidarity among CBOs, local leaders, and local media, to ensure the provision of active services for fighting the pandemic. In this way, CSOs must also continue their advocacy on behalf of people at the grassroots level.

What challenges does civil society face in playing these roles? What support will civil society need to meet these challenges?

According to *Ms Shaheen Anam*, the major challenge being faced by CSOs is the constraints of mobility imposed by the lockdown, which leads to working

over the phone or via the internet to organise awareness campaigns. Lack of funding is also a significant constraint for CSOs.

Dr Vinya Ariyaratne shared that one of the risks faced by CSOs in Sri Lanka was the obstruction and inability to move because of the threat of infection. The CSOs must keep trying to respond to pre-COVID injustices that have long since existed in society, instead of merely providing material relief from the pandemic. Another challenge is the shrinking space of the civil society and evocation of narrow ethnic and religious divides by governments. Additionally, the government's administrative systems have been bypassed in the name of efficiency to deliver essential services. Therefore, there is a lack of inclusion, even within the government.

Mr Jitram Lama shared that despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, several CSOs initiated efforts to aid the government in tracking the spread of the pandemic in Nepal, preparing a response plan in accordance with the spread of disease, monitoring ongoing action on the provision of relief to the most vulnerable communities etc. despite the lockdown. However, the lack of mobility caused by the lockdown posed a considerable challenge.

Ms Tashi Pem discussed the challenges faced by civil society, including decreasing relevance in the current times on a global level. CSOs seem to be even less relevant during the pandemic, where central agencies are majorly responsible for national relief efforts. Regaining this lost relevance after the pandemic may prove to be a challenge. There is also reduced civil society participation, since village meetings and local assemblies cannot take place during the lockdown and situations of restricted movement. Also, while a lot of funding windows have opened, they tend to be short term and rely on the quick expenditure of funds. Therefore, even though there are numerous big sources of funds during the pandemic, in the times to follow, they are likely to dry up or reduce.

Ms Sadiqa Salahuddin shared that one of the major challenges faced by civil society is how the distribution of food should take place. While bigger organisations have access to huge food supplies, there is no database detailing informal communities, daily wage workers, and rickshaw pullers that may need help. Since there was no government data available on such vulnerable populations which may also be considered new additions to the poor in

Pakistan, it has been hard to devise a way for wealthy philanthropists to reach these communities. This was especially difficult when there were no networks of communication, linking them together. On the other hands, communication on the grassroots level is the major strength and function of CSOs. The pandemic restricted this communication to a great extent. Another challenge to civil society has been posed by the prevalence of myths and stigmatisation surrounding the disease. While many people do not believe that the pandemic poses a danger, on the other hand, social distancing also requires the suspension of social norms of communication and behaviour.

Mr Jagadananda shared that frequently changing guidelines of the government is posing difficulties in accessing information. Yet another challenge is the spread of myths around Covid-19 in the community, making it difficult for the CSOs to communicate. There are also considerable gaps in demand and supply of the relief material, and duplication of work as the number of CSOs are operating in the same geography catering to the same population. CSOs in India also are left out of planning for the pandemic relief by the government bodies as there is no coordination with the local government institutions.

Md. Zakir shared that the civil society in Afghanistan is entirely dependent on sources of funding for their proper functioning, and this can pose a significant potential problem for the existence of CSOs. Lack of coordination between different CSOs is also an issue, especially the lack of communication with NGOs working in the health sector.

What roles can the government, donors, and philanthropic foundations play to enable civil society effectiveness?

Ms Shaheen Anam discussed that civil society must work in tandem with the government, while also continuing its efforts of providing relief and addressing stigmatisation associated with the pandemic. It is important to remember that the national and regional responses to the pandemic should be coordinated as far as possible. There have been many instances of coordination between CSOs and the government at the local level, which indicates that this coordination can lead to improved functioning of relief efforts. In the context of Bangladesh, three sectors must be the focus – migrant workers who send remittance to the country, the garment industry workers, and workers in other informal sectors. Globally, the pandemic has

resulted in increasing issues of domestic violence, child abuse, underage workers, early/childhood marriage, and declining health of women and children that require the involvement of CSOs. In this way, the monitoring role of the civil society in ensuring transparency and accountability of the government's relief efforts and stimulus packages is an essential responsibility. To this effect, the role of CSOs must be coordinated and targeted, especially in terms of mapping, research, and surveys.

Dr Vinya Ariyaratne flagged that the civil society is not represented at the policymaking level in Sri Lanka. The community voice is also poorly heard at the national level. However, an institutional request was raised to continue the maintenance and upkeep of 850 care homes around the country for which 25-30 CSOs created a platform. This has led to the formation of a civil society platform working across the country at the national and community level, in order to provide relief. Hence, CSOs must keep advocating to register their significance within the government structures. There is a need to learn and replicate models of Gram Swaraj and decentralised form of governance that has proved to be effective in Kerala. CSOs can use technology to respond to capacity building needs of the community. There is a need to develop new leaders to face challenges in terms of public health and other matters.

Mr Jitram Lama said that in Nepal, CSOs are committed to keep working to advance the government's mandate for providing relief measures. They will prepare national-level plans to enforce social distancing in the communities. There is a need for solidarity and commitment to mitigate risks of the pandemic at the national, regional and provincial level. CSOs have to support the government plan of action concerning supply chain, production and handling economic distress.

Ms Tashi Pem shared that the government of Bhutan has reached out to various CSOs to play a complementary role in reaching out to vulnerable, hard to access communities, women, and persons with disabilities. While this is a good initiative, rising to this occasion needs coalition building, group networks, and organisational capacity. To do so, civil society needs support and amplification of the responses coming from donors and funding organisations. Many CSO efforts may never gain momentum if they do not receive funding and attention from donors and government agencies. Donors and governments also need to continue their engagement with the civil society during the

pandemic to strengthen the value addition of the civil society and to make use of civil society structures, networks, and volunteers.

Mr Jagadananda suggested that a renewed commitment to rehabilitate the migrant workers in their native places of residence might have to be taken up by CSOs in India. The lack of coordination between CSOs and the government organisations needs to be addressed, and more fluent participation in planning, implementing and monitoring pandemic or disaster relief activities must be advocated for. Generating livelihoods and building skills amongst the communities will also be an essential area for future work.

Md. Zakir proposed that donors play an essential role in the functioning of CSOs, and must continue to provide funding to all sorts of organisations, instead of focusing only on NGOs in the health sector that operate in larger cities, to the exclusion of other CSOs. To this effect, the government must also collaborate and partner with civil society at the national and provincial level.

Ms Sadiqa Salahuddin shared that the civil society must create an advocacy agenda by focussing on the deep-rooted inequalities that have been sharpened by the pandemic. CSOs must also continue their efforts of providing direct relief, due to their communication networks and ability to reach remote and vulnerable communities. It is also important to re-examine research agendas for CSOs, including a focus on labour laws and safety nets for migrant workers, and loss of livelihood for women. Legislature resulting from the effects of the pandemic also has the possibility of enhancing social mobilisation through social security packages. In Pakistan, civil society shares a relationship of mistrust, which needs to be corrected. Donors working in tandem with CSOs must also focus on sustainable development and human rights initiatives.

REMARKS FROM THE COMMENTATORS

Dr Netra Timsina summarised the discussion by saying that the COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health crisis but will also pave the way for economic and social crises. It has unique effects that have been shaped by a neoliberal, capitalistic mode of development, and has also created a critical situation for the civil society. CSOs have two major roles to play in South Asian countries during and following the pandemic—providing social, material, and psychological support to vulnerable

communities, and as a pressure group to ensure the accountability and transparency of the government. The civil society also has the responsibility of engaging in the development of economic models following the pandemic.

Mr Harsh Jaitli reflected that the pandemic relief activities seems to have focused attention solely on the provision of services, and has also led to the drying up of funding for CSOs because the funds gave been routed to central governments. This has contributed to the global phenomena of the shrinking of civil society spaces, even though during situations of national disasters, CSOs provide crucial communication on the ground level with vulnerable and remote communities. CSOs are also at the frontline of delivering relief efforts. Still, they are hindered by the shrinking space of the civil society, as well as the bureaucratically designed system of providing relief to communities indicating their services as non-essential. Another issue faced by CSOs is the lack of funding, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Md. Tahseen pointed out that the existing model of governance, economic social security, and service provision has not been successful as a response to the pandemic. Therefore, it is important to consider new models and methods of providing a safety net to workers irrespective of their professions and economic standing. The lockdown has also impaired the functioning of CSOs, which has exacerbated the poverty being faced by vulnerable and migrant communities across South Asia. The pandemic has shown the importance of a robust public healthcare system, as well as organising strategies spanning the entirety of South Asia.

OPEN DISCUSSION

How can CSOs be better involved in COVID-19 management, given that a lot of exodus of workers has taken place from urban to rural areas? What can be done for migrant workers?

The problem that migrant workers are facing is manifold. In Bangladesh, those working in Middle-East and Europe have come back. Initially, there was mismanagement of those returning when they landed. They were not tested; there was no quarantining facility which resulted in the spread of infection. Thousands of them are now losing jobs. In Bangladesh the issue of external migrants needed to be advocated with the government for their proper care and economic rehabilitation strategy, given

that, they have been taking care of the national economy by remitting 10 billion dollars of money. We are pressurising the government to use the migrant welfare funds to ensure food and livelihoods and health care services for these people. CSOs are running a nation-wide campaign for lessening the stigmatisation of returnee migrant population.

The role of the Nepalese government has been reactive rather than proactive, which has worsened living conditions of the poor. The legal environment is not comfortable for civil society at the moment since CSOs are heavily dependent on international organisations. The constraint of funds poses a significant challenge for the civil society, and the current situation makes it difficult for CSOs to work directly at the community level, which is why they have to work with the local instead. Another challenge posed to civil society is that their existence is not adequately recognised, and this makes it harder for CSOs to work together towards a cohesive role. However, the media often amplifies this work, and this is an important strength.

Many panellists have discussed the coordinated action of the civil society, and if this is linked to monitoring the government's efforts, then a unified framework is needed for all CSOs to participate in this process. Does this unified framework exist at this moment in Sri Lanka?

In response to this question, it was shared that while such a framework does not currently exist, national-level CSOs are part of UN organisations and WHO and are coordinating key sectors such as education, health, agriculture etc. There is hope that this platform can be used to bring the civil society together collectively. Strengthening governance and connecting with community organisations are also very important because this is the way forward in situations where mobility is restricted. This also contributes to capacity building for CBOs, and there have been efforts made in Sri Lanka to formalise a network of CBOs across the country to assess the socio-economic recovery process following the pandemic.

CLOSING REMARKS

Mr Ichal Supriadi reflected that collaboration between different civil societies across the ADN and among South Asian countries is beneficial. It should

be expanded and include the empowerment of vulnerable communities like women, people with disabilities, and many other sectors affected by the pandemic. The civil society has played a role in ensuring checks and balances for the relief efforts carried out by the government during the pandemic. It has been important for CSOs to fill the gap of the services and relief provided during the first wave of the pandemic. The civil society must also focus on the common strategies that must be executed following the pandemic at the local, state, and national level. CSOs will also face challenges in terms of finances and funding. Still, they must try to reposition themselves in the crisis and remember to resist any repressive strategies that may be employed by the state in controlling the pandemic. Suppressing free speech, peaceful dissenters, suppressing legislative oversight and ignoring minorities will not have positive results. While the participative nature of democracies will make it harder for governments to respond to the crises created by the pandemic, it is crucial to address these crises democratically. CSOs need to emphasise the sustainability of democratic governance in their countries.

Dr Rajesh Tandon concluded the discussion by sharing that while the civil society works to position

people as the epicentre of democracy, it is important for South Asian CSOs to consider themselves as the citizens of a democratic subcontinent, and to collectively visualise how South Asian countries can function in a better way. The Migrant Fund Watchdog in Bangladesh, National Platform for Institutional Care in Sri Lanka, High-level Monitoring Coordination Group in Nepal, Citizen Volunteers' Network in Bhutan, Informal Outreach and Database Effort in Pakistan, Citizen Action Group in Odisha (India), and outreach to citizens in conflict areas in Afghanistan are important initiatives. This outreach work is unique to CSOs, and cannot be carried out by the government alone. Therefore, it is vital to produce a bottom-up South Asian perspective, and to focus on their contributions as essential to the functioning of democracies. Innovative ideas that germinate by South Asian CSOs should also become catalysts of experiments and should be shared across the subcontinent. South Asia has a largely youthful demographic, and this should be mobilised as a strength by involving the youth in the process of reconnecting with indigenous heritage, knowledge systems, natural resource base, and the capabilities of our local leaders and local capacities.