SAMVAD
CONVERSATION

RE-DESIGNING
CIVIL SOCIETY
ECOSYSTEMS:
FROM LOCAL TO
GLOBAL

15 SEPTEMBER 2021

5 – 7 PM

PRIA@40
SHAPING OUR TOMORROWS, TODAY

ICNL
INTERNATIONAL CENTER
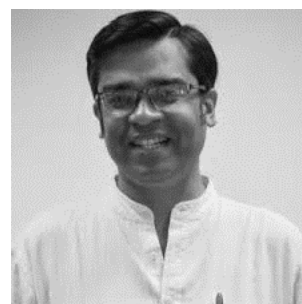FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT LAW

VANI
Celebrating 30 Years
VOICE OF THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

ADN
ASIA DEMOCRACY NETWORK

Empowering civil society

CONTENTS

❖ ***Civil societies are not independent of people*** – The civil society is independent and autonomous of the state and the market, but not independent of the people. We need to find a common ground to make connections between emerging social movements and the funded civil society organisations.

❖ ***Create space to reconnect*** – We must create space to reconnect with a view to facilitate and support the resistance. These resistances must be decentralised. We need to make civil society actions people-centric because as one cannot accept democracy if it does not work for the people.

❖ ***Use modern technologies to build solidarity*** – As both information and misinformation can be weaponised easily; one need to use the technology wisely. We need to tap technology that makes it possible to globalise our decentralised efforts. We must build horizontal solidarity.

❖ ***Build local leadership*** – The civil society must navigate through the hostile environment and build the capacities of the local leaders. The idea is to enable the local leaders and not usurp them. We are not built for competition but collaboration and cooperation because we deal with social change.

❖ ***Crisis of liberal democracy*** – Our society operates within the framework of liberal democracy and this democracy is in a crisis today. This has resulted in shrinking civic spaces and freedoms. We are witnessing the retreat of a welfare state.

PROFILE OF THE PANELLISTS

Mr. David Moore, Vice President, Legal Affairs has been working with International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), USA since 2001. He has advanced legal reform affecting civil society and civic freedoms in a diverse range of contexts, including in Africa, Asia and Europe. Mr. Moore is currently responsible for managing several of ICNL's global programs and oversees ICNL's work in the Asia & the Pacific region.

Mr. Amitabh Behar is the CEO of Oxfam India. He is passionate about governance accountability, social and economic equality, and citizen participation. Over the years, he has worked on building people-centric campaigns, alliances for social justice, and linking micro-activism to macro changes. He is the Vice Board Chair of CIVICUS and sits on the board of other organisations like Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA), Mobile Crèche, VANI, YUVA, Global Fund for Community Foundation (GFCF).

Mr. Ichal Supriadi is currently the Secretary-General of Asian Democracy Network (ADN). He actively engages in the democracy movement, co-founder of Democracy Watch Indonesia (2001), co-founder of INDEPT Indonesia (2012), and currently served as an advisory council of the Human Rights Alliance (HRA) – Pakistan, Board Advisor of the People Empowerment Foundation (PEF) in Thailand.

Mr. Harsh Jaitli, CEO, Voluntary Action Network India (VANI) is an expert in policy planning and management. With informed strategies and analytical thinking, he has created a pool of research studies and membership at VANI. He has worked on the themes like environment, health, local governance, Right to Information, organizational development etc. He has also driven his energies on institutional strengthening in the field of information resource management, financial management and project cycle management.

Mr. Noshir H Dadrawala, is the CEO of the Centre for Advancement of Philanthropy (CAP) through which he has been offering compliance-related advisory to non-profits and corporate social initiatives. Noshir's main role at CAP involves simplifying the confusing and complex maze of old, but ever-changing, new laws and his legal expertise in the sector is widely recognized, as is his deep understanding of compliance within philanthropy.

Prof. Mudar Kassis is the Director of Muwatin Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, Birzeit University, Palestine. His current research interests are embedded in the tradition of praxis and include democratisation, decolonisation, the concept of dignity, every day, research ethics, political corruption, and populism He currently serves as director of Muwatin Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, director of the MA Programme in Democracy and Human Rights, and co-director of the Windsor-Birzeit Dignity Initiative.

Ms. Shaheen Anam is the Executive Director of Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), a grant-making organisation supporting Human Rights and Governance work of organisations in Bangladesh targeting the most vulnerable and marginalised population. She has worked for CARE Bangladesh as the Coordinator for their largest programme and the Ministry of Women's Affairs as Project Director for a Gender Equality Project. She has also worked in international organisations such as UNDP and UNHCR both in Bangladesh and abroad.

Dr. Rajesh Tandon, Founder President, Participatory Research in Asia, India, is currently a UNESCO Co-Chair on Community Based Research and Social Responsibilities in Higher Education. He serves as chairperson of the Global Alliance on Community-Engaged Research (GACER) network, which facilitates the sharing of knowledge and information worldwide to further community-based research and has also served as an Advisor to the Commonwealth Foundation, UNDP, and numerous other international agencies.

Dr. Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay is the Director of Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), India. For more than 30 years he has been working on citizen participation in urban and rural contexts. He is an internationally acclaimed researcher, trainer, and facilitator of organisation development and participatory planning, monitoring, evaluation, and impact assessment. Currently, he is the Co-Coordinator of Asia Democracy Research Networks (ADRN) and serves on the Governing Council of Asia Democracy Network (ADN).

As Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) completes its 40 years, it recommits to enable the eco-systems in which civil society and non-profits operate today. Between August and December 2021, PRIA will be convening PRIA@40 Conversations with communities, partners, associates, supporters, experts, investors and colleagues, drawn from civil society, philanthropic initiatives, donors, government, business, media and academia, to share ideas and experiences that can help 're-imagine' PRIA, its interventions and the world in the coming period.

In this context, PRIA convened a Conversation (Samvad) on Re-designing Civil Society Eco-System: From Local to Global on 15 September 2021 in collaboration with International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), USA; Asia Democratic Network (ADN), South Korea/ Thailand; Voluntary Action Network India (VANI). The virtual conversation, attended by 105 participants, was moderated by the Director of PRIA, **Dr. Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay**.

The Conversation (Samvad) explored the following questions:

- How has pandemic affected the ecosystem in which civil society operates? What impact do these effects have on the effectiveness of civil society?
- What strategies civil society should consider to enable its operating environment?
- What policies and actions government and other stakeholders should consider to enable the environment for civil society to function?

The Conversation began with a short presentation by Ms. Yashvi Sharma (Training Specialist, PRIA) on PRIA's journey of the past four decades with a special focus on its various interventions on the theme of Empowering Civil Society. Empowering Civil Society has been one of the oldest programmes of PRIA and therefore it has the longest history of interventions.

After the presentation, **Dr. Bandyopadhyay** invited **Mr. David Moore** (Vice President, ICNL, USA) and **Mr. Amitabh Behar** (CEO, Oxfam India) to set the stage for the discussion.

Mr. David Moore opened the discussion by saying, '*we are living at a time of converging crisis'*. He stressed that there has been a growing trend of shrinking civic spaces and freedoms. One of the characteristics of this trend is that it is global and not specific to any one country. These constraints impede civil society organisations that are working across the development spectrum including groups working on climate change, poverty alleviation, humanitarian aid and the COVID response. The governments are using a diverse range of legal measures. The global pandemic has accelerated democratic and regulatory backsliding on many issues, including the compression of civic space.

In response to the question of enabling civil society environment, he stated that the starting point is to empower local leadership. The goal needs to be to support and not to supplant local leaders. We need to empower local partners to enable them to navigate hostile environment so that civil society organisations can continue to operate. It is important to recognise that the local leadership resides not only in formally registered CSOs but also in alternative spaces, social movements and other forms of popular organisations.

Further, he emphasised on the importance of creating spaces for dialogues among the civil society partners so that they can find ways to liaise with the government and other actors. It is imperative to increase regulatory capacity to ensure greater civil society participation in government policymaking. Monitoring impact is yet another significant area of focus for enabling civil society. Legal reforms may not always work but there is always an opportunity to monitor the impact and implementation of laws, with the intent of improving implementation.

With a special focus on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC), he said that these international mechanisms play an important role in enabling civil society in development cooperation. In July 2021, the DAC group adopted a recommendation that was it's first-ever policy instrument on enabling civil society. It identified 28 key principles that the donor governments must follow to protect and promote civic space and support civil society.

The recommendations aim to provide a powerful tool not only to influence donor country behaviour in terms of their approach to civil society but also the recipient country and their approach to civil society and civic space. Lastly, it is important to focus on the emergency responses, humanitarian assistance and to continue to invest in organisational development and sustainability of CSOs in the long term.

"support, not supplant local leadership of civil society"

Taking the point of 'global crisis' forward, **Mr. Amitabh Behar** (CEO, Oxfam India) said that this is the toughest crisis that civil society is facing ever since its existence. He said, '*I think civil society's job is to face challenges, but this is probably the toughest moment that we are facing at the moment.*' It's important to note that this crisis had hit us even before the COVID-19 pandemic. He stated that civil society operates in a framework of liberal democracy and at the moment we are facing a crisis of liberal democracy.

Reiterating **Mr. Moore's** comment on shrinking civic space, he said that these restrictions signify a move towards illiberal and authoritarian regimes. In other words, we are looking at the retreat of a welfare state. Having said that, he mentioned that in the last year we have witnessed an expansion of the unorganised civil society. Such as the Black Lives Matter in U.S., people's protest against National Register of Citizens in India and so on.

In this context, one needs to figure out different ways of working with new actors in the sector because the landscape of civil society has transformed itself completely. Redesigning the ecosystem would be very presumptuous at this moment, given that these spontaneous movements are the ones that demonstrate people's power. Maybe we can think about ways to add value to the expansion of civil society by working around advocacy. We need to organise and vacate the space for new leadership that is emerging.

It is absolutely critical that we go back and reflect on our role in the emerging civil society needs. As democratic civil society, we need to get out of the technocratic bubble – that we have the blueprints, we know how to do randomised controlled trials, we can make change happen and so on.

It is critical that we move out of this apolitical and acontextual intervention that we often design. We need to acknowledge that it is not how development happens or how change happens. The fundamental role of civil society is to continue to work on holding the power to account. We usually see the state as the agent of transformation as it has the repository of power and thus our engagements with it are limited. It is crucial to talk about coalitions and alliances at this juncture. It is important to think of ways to build and nurture those alliances. Lastly, we always talk about generating knowledge, but we also need to think about using this knowledge as a tool of organising.

"there is no substitute for organising and mobilising"

Next, **Dr. Bandyopadhyay** invited **Mr. Ichal Supriadi** (Secretary-General, Asia Democracy Network, South Korea/ Thailand) to share the recommendations from the sub-regional consultations for Asia Democracy Assembly 2021. The purpose of these consultations was

to consolidate and navigate CSO response to pushback democratic regression and to develop a commitment to democracy and human rights.

The consultation was held on 10th, 11th and 12th September in South East Asia, South Asia and North-East Asia/ Central Asia, respectively. Some suggestions from the CSOs, highlighted in these consultations, were to increase the multi-stakeholder space for collaboration, to open up more space for media, to increase effective communication for sharing information among the civil societies, to increase space for youths to join and to increase the national level democracy consolidation.

One needs to promote coalitions and intersectionality and not work in silos. The draconian laws need to be subjected to judicial review because these laws have been weakening the democratic institutions. There have been increasing incidences of violence against religious minorities and the freedom of media has been constrained. The CSOs need to indulge in collective action more than ever and build solidarity among other CSOs to address these concerns. It needs to expand advocacy to engage the public and start movements and protests.

Collaborative activism on the local, regional, and national levels is needed. The capacity of anti-surveillance skills and the movements of the youth engagement should be built. The weaponisation of misinformation is controlling public opinion.

"create space for youth to strengthen civil society"

Moving on to the next segment of the discussion, **Dr. Bandyopadhyay** requested the panellists to share their reflections on **how the pandemic has affected the eco-system in which civil society operates and also on how it impacts the effectiveness of civil society**.

'*On the one hand, we have the pandemic and on the other hand, there was an epidemic of changing legislations in India'*, said **Mr. Noshir Dadrawala** (Chief Executive, Centre for Advancement of Philanthropy, India). He highlighted that the budget announcement of 2020 brought in a wave of massive changes for CSOs. This led to the CSR laws becoming more rigid than ever.

Moreover, the changes in the FCRA regulations were the worst of all the changes that followed, as it closed the doors for sub granting and thereby eliminating the role of the intermediaries. It also stated that if FCRA registration is revoked or is willingly surrendered by the CSOs, then all the assets, whether movable or immovable, will vest in government authority. This change, in his opinion, is unconstitutional. He concluded by saying that we need to think of ways to tackle this and we need to make this into a people's movement by bringing people to the centre.

"changing legislations have made it dis- enabling for the civil societies to function"

'The pandemic has disrupted lives of many people across the world, but the worst were the people who were working in the informal sector', said **Ms. Shaheen Anam** (Executive Director, Manusher Jonno Foundation, Bangladesh).

It is important to remember that even if the pandemic goes away tomorrow, the social impact that it will leave behind is going to stay with us for a very long time. As CSOs, the most important thing is our relationship vis-à-vis the government.

However, the government does not give us recognition for the roles that we play. One of the most important roles that civil society has played is that of maintaining harmony in society. It relates to gender equality, rights of the minorities, working with the youth and much more.

Endorsing **Mr. Behar's** comment on the crisis of liberal democracy, she added that the state has become extremely powerful, and the decisions have become centralised in a way that has intimidated the civil society into silence. Consequently, civil society has not been able to play its role effectively.

"civil society is not given importance and recognition for the roles that we play"

Prof. Mudar Kassis (Director, Muwatin Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, Birzeit University, Palestine) began by stating that Palestine has been under a strict colonial regime from which they need to free themselves. The reason is the emergence and the victory of the new liberal oligarchy. This is a global crisis. We, as civil society, need to think of ways to get out of this crisis.

Referring to the civil society that emerged in the 1980s and the 1990s, he stated that at that time the efforts were made to find a common ground and not fall into the neo-liberal regime of radicalisation and polarisation. He said, '*we have come to the point of resistance today where the next logical step would be to revolt*'.

Pondering on the role of civil society in politics, he says that we have moved out of politics quite a bit. The whole societal organisation has changed, and they do not have much conformity and interest. The civil society will have to split and define itself. Not all the CSOs will stay on the same front because if we are resisting the mainstream which has been dominated by oligarchs, we will have to pick a side. We cannot stay in the middle anymore. We will have to choose because we will not be able to rely on corporate funding and donors anymore if we want to really change the mainstream. After all, the money does come from the mainstream.

"we are only masters of ourselves… civil society cannot be in the middle anymore"

Mr. Harsh Jaitli (CEO, Voluntary Action Network India) said, *'it is always a challenge to be relevant to the society in the current reality and also to operate with the limited resources'*. There is a new reality around which we need to work. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the shrinking operating spaces of civil society. The world has witnessed that even with these limitations; the sector operated and stretched its capacity to the extreme to serve its community. The future is about finding ways to operate with limited realities. Civil society has vibrancy and the capacity to bounce back. We have to work together to find new relationships and new social contracts. The equation of these relationships has changed, and we have to build on these relationships. We need to keep up our collaboration and cooperation because we are not designed for competition. We do not deal with machines but with transformations and social change – that is the key on which we need to build.

"everything has changed, we need to change too"

Meet our panellists…

[From top left to right: Dr. Rajesh Tandon, Prof. Mudar Kassis, Mr. Harsh Jaitli, Dr. Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay, Mr. David Moore, Mr. Ichal Supriadi, Mr. Noshir Dadrawala, Mr. Amitabh Behar and Ms. Shaheen Anam]

Furthering the discussion, **Dr. Bandyopadhyay** requested the panellists to share their thoughts **on the policies and actions that the governments and other stakeholders should consider to provide an enabling environment for the functioning of the civil society**.

Emphasising on the importance of dialogues between the different stakeholders, **Mr. Behar** posed a rather important question:

- If other stakeholders do not believe in liberalism, is there a scope for dialogue?
- Is there a possibility of dialogue between people who are fundamentally against the core values?

We also need to engage with transnational corporations. We need to move from shareholder capitalism to stakeholder capitalism.

Mr. Moore said, '*in looking at the laws globally that are affecting civic freedom, statistically 72 percent are restrictive, and 28 percent are enabling*'. However, it's important to take note that not all is bad news. There is openness among the governments to improving laws. Taking advantage of those opportunities is significant.

However, the reality is also that many governments are also not interested in that kind of enabling changes. In that case, it is on us – the civil society – to make the case more effective to them, however difficult it maybe. Even within largely restrictive centralised communities, one can identify and nurture allies that can bring positive changes in the long term. It is going to demand perseverance.

Dr. Bandyopadhyay invited **Prof. Kassis** to share his opinion **on the role of the interlocutor in enabling and facilitating dialogue in a situation when the deliberation looks difficult**. He was also requested to comment on the question of **why people are rejecting the vaccines and how this actually affects the rights of everyone else?**

'*The notion of liberalism has been hijacked by a certain type of liberalism that has been conditioned by the market dynamics'*, said **Prof. Kassis.** Hence it is not about personal

freedom but freedom from the market. As long as it is about freedom from the market, it will result in the co-existence of many individualism and this may be a reason why we see different opinions in the community about vaccines.

He further states that this reaction is different from the reaction of the people from the 1970s or 1980s because back then people understood that their individual capacities were granted to the extent that was allowed by certain liberalism. Unfortunately, liberalism is not a choice for the future because it has been overtaken and killed by the neoliberalism regime.

We need to think of an alternative. We must go back and think of democracy where politics is not hijacked by politicians and elites; it is popular and not populist. Nevertheless, the challenge is to orient our work based on the popular demand without fitting it into the neo-liberal agenda. This is only possible when we revisit democracy and make it people centric.

The discussion was summed up by **Dr. Rajesh Tandon** (Founder-President, Participatory Research in Asia). In his closing remarks he said, '*when we use the phrase 'ecosystem' we want to think beyond regulations and relationships between civil society and the funders – sort of a template approach to projectised work*'.

Reflecting on his journey, he said that there was a tendency of looking at the space of civil society as autonomous, independent of the state and the market, but not independent of people. Over the years our focus has been to search for common ground but there is very little left of the common ground.

The new initiatives of the grassroots are not connected with the formal, organised, funded CSOs. The pandemic has exposed that the model of global consensus is broken, not just for the poor but for everyone. This creates a space for us to find a way to reconnect with the view to facilitate and support the resistance that is happening. Resistances must be decentralised even when the state and the market become centralised.

In the last 10 years, while our technology usage has increased, our global solidarity has declined. We need to tap technology that makes it possible to globalise our decentralised efforts. One cannot accept a model which does not work for people and still be labelled as democracy. Participatory democracy encourages us to work for citizenship links within society without reference to the state because if you continue to refer to the state, your relationship with the state becomes vertical. The first dialogue has to be with our families and relatives who are working in multinationals before it can really happen with the institutions of state and market.

"civil society is independent of state and market, not independent of people"

The conversation (Samvad) ended with a vote of thanks by **Dr. Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay**.

5.00 pm to 5.15 pm

Welcome and Introduction to PRIA@40 Programmes and Conversation

Moderator: Dr Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay, Director, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), India

5.15 pm to 5.30 pm

Setting the Stage

- Mr. David Moore, Vice President, Legal Affairs, International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), USA
- Mr Amitabh Behar, Chief Executive Officer, Oxfam India and Vice Chair, CIVICUS

5.30 pm to 6.00 pm

Deep Dive Conversation (opening round)

- Mr. Noshir Dadrawala, Chief Executive, Centre for Advancement of Philanthropy, India
- Mr. Harsh Jaitli, Chief Executive Officer, Voluntary Action Network India
- Ms Shaheen Anam, Executive Director, Manusher Jonno Foundation, Bangladesh
- Prof Mudar Kassis, Director, Muwatin Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, Birzeit University, Palestine

6.00 pm to 6.20 pm

Open Discussion

6.20 pm to 6.45 pm

Deep Dive Conversation (closing round)

6.45 pm to 6.55 pm

Key Takeaways

Dr Rajesh Tandon, Founder-President, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), India

6.55 pm to 7.00 pm

Vote of Thanks and Closure

Dr. Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay, Director, PRIA, India

PRIA@40 EVENTS

DATE	TITLE	THEME
12 August 2021	Youth Participation and Active Citizenship	Citizen Participation
20 August 2021	Planning for Urban Informalities	Sustainable Urban Future
31 August 2021	Accelerating Capacities in Civil Society and Non-Profits	Empowering Civil Society
2 September 2021	Nurturing Civil Society Partnerships in Uncertain Times	Empowering Civil Society
15 September 2021	Redesigning Civil Society Ecosystem: From Local to Global	Empowering Civil Society