



Conference Summary



**BUILDING BRIDGES
AMONG CSOS: DIALOGUE
ACROSS CONTINENTS**

Together we can achieve more!

Abong CCRDA VANI VENRO

**8th & 9th September, 2025
Vishwa Yuvak Kendra, New Delhi**

This event was developed as part of the VENRO project "Countdown 2030- Global Goals need Civil Society", in partnership with ABONG, CCRDA & VANI.
The project is supported by ENGAGEMENT GLOBAL with funds from the BMZ.

Supported by the
Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development

Organisers:
Voluntary Action Network India (VANI)

Partners:
ABONG (Brazil), CCRDA (Ethiopia), VENRO (Germany)

Supported by:
ENGAGEMENT GLOBAL with BMZ Funding



Introduction

This landmark conference brought together leaders from civil society, multilateral organizations, embassies, and practitioners from India, Ethiopia, Brazil, and Germany to foster dialogue, share learning, and strategize on strengthening civil society organisations (CSOs) in the face of global challenges. With shrinking civic space, shifting regulatory environments, climate crises, and rapidly changing technologies, the event provided a rare opportunity for honest dialogue, alliance-building, and cross-continental learning. A total of 67 participants from all over India and three partner countries participated and contributed to this timely and important dialogue.

The event was part of a Partners Week (8th –12th September 2025), which also included field visits, networking meetings, and cultural exchanges. This conference was organized under the *Countdown 2030: Global Goals Need Civil Society* project - a joint initiative of Abong, CCRDA, VANI, and VENRO. The initiative seeks to strengthen collaborative advocacy by civil society organizations and ensure their collective voices are effectively represented on global platforms.



Day 1: 8 September 2025

Session 1: Inaugural Session, Welcome Address, and Book Launch

Key Speakers:

- Mr. Harsh Jaitli (CEO, VANI)
- Ms. Åsa Månsson (Managing Director, VENRO)
- Mr. George Enzweiler (Charge d'Affaires, German Embassy)
- H.E. Ambassador of Ethiopia to India
- Dr. Rajesh Tandon (Founding President, PRIA)
- Dr. Nigussu Legesse (Executive Director, CCRDA)



- Mr. Henrique Frota (Executive Director, ABONG)



Mr. Harsh Jaitli opened the conference by underlining the gravity of shrinking civic space due to geopolitical tensions and climate challenges, and the imperative for cross-continental CSO collaboration. Ms. Åsa Månsson emphasized the need for mutual learning among continents and highlighted the importance of joint advocacy on multilateral platforms like the G20.

During his keynote address, Mr. George Enzweiler cited the crucial watchdog and innovation roles of CSOs in democracies and expressed Germany's steadfast commitment to defending civic space and human rights globally. His Excellency, the Ambassador of Ethiopia lauded the exchange, stating, "My people coming from Addis Ababa will take everything that is useful to implement in Ethiopia."



The inaugural session concluded with the launch of the joint publication "Stay Strong, Global Goals Need Civil Society", (developed by Abong, CCRDA, VANI, VENRO) showcasing impact stories and innovations from the four partner countries. Representatives from each country joined in the launch ceremony along with the distinguished guests from the German Embassy.

A short video was presented alongside the book release, distilling the main findings of the report. In this video, leaders from each participating country responded to two central questions: "What gives you hope for a sustainable future?" and "How can civil society remain strong?" The video captured a rich diversity of perspectives and a spirit of optimism, effectively weaving together the conference's main themes and powerfully illustrating the shared aspirations and resilience of civil society across borders.



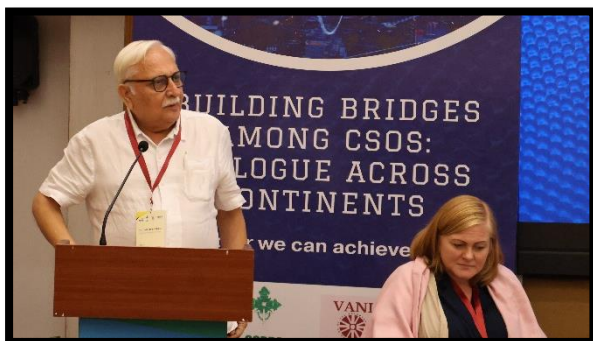
Introductory Panel: “Stay Strong: Global Goals Need Civil Society”

Moderator:

- Harsh Jaitli (Chief Executive Officer, VANI)

Panelists:

- Dr. Rajesh Tandon (Founder-President, PRIA, India)
- Mr. Sale Wase (Senior Director, Consortium of Christian Relief and Development Association, Ethiopia)
- Mr. Henrique Frota (Executive Director, ABONG, Brazil)
- Ms. Åsa Månsson (Managing Director, VENRO, Germany)



The session explored how CSOs are essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and overcoming global crises. Dr. Rajesh Tandon emphasized the unique role of CSOs in capturing local realities, amplifying marginalized voices, and holding institutions accountable, warning against allowing global platforms to dilute grassroots perspectives.

Mr. Sale Wase drew on the Ethiopian context to illustrate how resilient, collaborative leadership and strong alliances have allowed civil society to withstand both political upheaval and global funding pressures.



Mr. Henrique Frota shared examples from Brazil that underscored the power of multi-stakeholder and cross-continental partnerships, especially in areas like environmental protection and social justice. He stressed the need to continually defend civic space and the importance of civil society in international governance.

Ms. Åsa Månsson spoke about maintaining hope and momentum within the European and German civil society spaces amidst complex regulations and shrinking funding. She underlined the value of mutual learning and sharing strategies across continents, and reaffirmed that strong alliances with CSOs from the global South are vital for meeting today's challenges.

Audience members expressed gratitude for such a global, participatory platform. Several praised the opportunity to interact with peers beyond their own continent and voiced hopes that outcomes would lead to practical cross-national strategies. Some stressed the need for such sessions to also drive national-level action and policy engagement.

Session 2: Panel on “Changing Global Realities: Role of Civil Society”

Moderated by: Dr. Jayant Kumar (Former Head of Programs, CASA)

Panelists:

- Mr. A.K. Singh (Director, LEADS)
- Mr. Mathew Cherian (Global Ambassador, HelpAge International)
- Ms. Anke Kurat (Head, Global Justice & Sustainable Development, VENRO)

Mr. Mathew Cherian detailed the shrinking funding space, narrating how grassroots organisations are facing closure due to regulatory restrictions and loss of donor support. He argued for a reorientation towards local philanthropy, transparency, and public engagement, emphasizing the Indian nonprofit sector's innovation legacy (e.g., ASHA workers and India Mark II Handpump). Ms. Anke Kurat described strategic alliances—both national and transnational—formed by German CSOs, and endorsed Agenda 2030's principle that “every country is a developing country.” Mr. Singh underlined the necessity of strengthening both formal and informal civic structures and cultivating inter-country learning for sectoral resilience.



Audience interventions focused on the urgent need for local resource mobilization in India, highlighting numerous examples of community-led fundraising. Some challenged panelists to suggest concrete steps for influencing restrictive regulation, while others reflected on the loss of informal civic traditions and pressed for more inclusive advocacy strategies.

Session 3: “Reinvent or Fall – Ways for CSOs to Remain Relevant”



Moderated by: Mr. Dattatray Patil (CEO, Yuva Rural Association)

Panelists:

- Dr. Mazher Hussain (Executive Director, COVA)
- Ms. Jaswant Kaur (Founder Director, UdayKriti Foundation)
- Mr. Sale Wase (Senior Director, CCRDA, Ethiopia)

Dr. Mazher Hussain described the evolution of CSO roles—from direct service provision to advocacy and facilitation—and the need to stay relevant by embracing community empowerment and collaboration. He stated the example of his organization, COVA. Ms. Jaswant Kaur shared Deepalaya's innovation in reinventing community schools as learning centers amidst regulatory hurdles, and their move to digital and community-led learning models during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mr. Wase outlined how CCRDA has adopted collective leadership, enhanced digital transformation, and invested in institutional resilience to remain impactful in the face of rapid change.

All panelists stressed that continual adaptation, proximity to communities, and openness to new models are vital for CSO survival and relevance.

Audience members raised questions about balancing external compliance with internal priorities, and the risk of becoming “vendors” rather than facilitators. Various participants discussed localized solutions to digital divides, sharing experiences in adapting to remote learning and service delivery. Others echoed the value of reinvention and asserted the power of communities in driving program redesign.





Session 4: “Creating Space for Multi-Stakeholder Engagement”

Moderated by: Mr. Henrique Frota (Executive Director, ABONG)

Panelists:

- Dr. K.K. Upadhyay (Chairperson, Centre for Sustainability & CSR, BIMTECH)
- Ms. Meenakshi Batra (Board Member, VANI; past CEO, CAF India)
- Mr. Jagadananda (Mentor & Co-founder, CYSD)
- Mr. Rakesh Patel (Country Director, WHH)

Ms. Meenakshi Batra advocated the need for bridging mechanisms between CSR and small CSOs and highlighted intermediaries’ value in due diligence, proposal design, capacity building, and equitable resource sharing. Dr. K.K. Upadhyay traced the historical evolution of CSR in India, highlighted the unique operational cultures of corporates and nonprofits, and stressed the current dominance of corporate foundations.

Mr. Jagadananda emphasized the importance of trust-building between corporates and CSOs, pointing out that both often operate from different "worlds" with mismatched expectations and incentive structures. He argued that for meaningful multistakeholder engagement, both sides must value each other's unique contributions, and CSOs must assert their knowledge of community realities. Mr. Katal contended that multistakeholder platforms should not just channel funds but nurture a culture of shared learning, transparency, and adaptability.

All panelists and discussants agreed that multi-stakeholder engagement and shared services (e.g., for compliance and administration) would help small CSOs access resources and stay competitive. Risks of market-driven, top-down approaches dominating the agenda were candidly discussed and participants called for CSOs to be true co-creators in policy and program development.

Participants from the floor reiterated challenges with current CSR processes such as high compliance costs, reporting burdens, and geographical exclusion of remote CSOs from corporate funding. Several offered accounts of grassroots coalitions experimenting with shared back-office services or community-led proposal design to boost efficiency. Others called for more openness and regular dialogue between funders, organizations, and beneficiaries to collectively address sectoral bottlenecks. There was widespread agreement that platforms like VANI should lead initiatives to build trust, technical capacity, and shared accountability amongst all stakeholders.





Day 2: 9 September 2025

Session 5: “Articulating Voices from Local to Global”

Moderated by: Mr. C.S. Reddy (Founder & CEO, APMAS)

Panelists:

- Dr. Jyotsna Mohan Singh (Advocacy Officer, Forus International)
- Mr. Henrique Frota (Executive Director, ABONG, Brazil)
- Ms. Hemal Kamat (Director, Concept Sansthan)
- Mr. Jaydeep Biswas (Chief of Policy Advocacy & Partnerships, UNFPA India)

Dr. Jyotsna emphasized the urgency of “glocalization”—ensuring locally grounded priorities shape global SDG advocacy and forums. Mr. Frota and Ms. Kamat highlighted South-South learning and the need for CSO capacity building through cross-continental exchanges. Mr. Biswas discussed using data-driven narratives to drive policy engagement at all levels, and outlined how local organizations can gain voice and legitimacy by collaborating on large-scale coalitions and thematic alliances (e.g., climate justice). The session explored practical ways to amplify community voices in global dialogues and strengthen country-level platforms for sustained advocacy and accountability.



Session 6: “Building Bridges” (Open House / Reflections)



This interactive session was moderated by Mr. Harsh Jaitli and provided space for reflection and the synthesis of key lessons, facilitated by conference leaders.

Open House: Participant Discussion Points

- One participant critiqued the persistence of Eurocentrism in development discourse, arguing that

true progress means respecting and celebrating local ways of living, not importing models from elsewhere.

- Another attendee from Kolkata described having built and run SHG (Self Help Group) conferences designed and led entirely by community members, with events attracting thousands, and emphasized that such locally-driven efforts should be scaled up across different regions.
- A veteran from Maharashtra reflected that ongoing collaboration and stakeholder engagement, especially at state and district levels, would be crucial for future development agendas. He called for extending national dialogues to decentralized platforms.
- A German delegate praised the Indian sector's spirit of self-reflection and openness about the need for reinvention, contrasting it with less flexible attitudes often seen in German organizations. She urged continued self-critical dialogue and cross-country learning.
- Several civil society leaders argued for moving beyond identity-based networks (organizations/donors as banners) to focus advocacy more strongly on issues—especially when tackling sensitive topics or working in restrictive environments.
- There were repeated calls for evidence-driven advocacy, with participants urging the sector to prioritize data, case studies, and community storytelling to reclaim legitimacy and influence policy.
- Many highlighted the growing role of local philanthropy and individual giving, stressing the need for participatory monitoring and grassroots coalition-building, both to build resilience and credibility in local organizations.



- Practical examples were shared about how village development plans and technical acumen have helped some NGOs grow into new areas, despite challenging funding and regulatory climates.

- Participants discussed the growing trend of private actors

(especially CSR arms) building their own technical teams and institutions, sometimes sidelining local organizations, and called for stronger collaboration instead of competition.

-



- The session closed with an appeal for more regular peer exchanges across countries and thematic alliances (notably around climate justice), with South-South collaboration seen as essential for tackling common civil society challenges.

Key Takeaways from the Conference

- **Reclaim Local Legitimacy:** Investing in community-led storytelling, participatory monitoring, and data-driven influence is essential for CSOs to remain credible and effective.
- **Build Diverse Funding Models:** Philanthropy, CSR, individual donations, and coalition-based fundraising should be strategically combined to ensure organizational sustainability.
- **Shift Advocacy to Issues, Not Just Identities:** Effective advocacy—especially on sensitive topics—requires prioritizing issues and lived experiences over organizational names and banners.
- **Embrace Continued Self-Reflection and Reinvention:** Both local and international CSOs need to adapt continually, upskill, and remain open to changing roles and relationships.
- **Co-create with Multiple Stakeholders:** True impact and sustainable change depend on collaborative approaches transcending silos between government, business, and civil society.
- **Prioritize Data and Knowledge Management:** Building and sharing robust evidence bases strengthens policy influence and supports coalition-building.
- **Advance Regional and Global Solidarity:** South-South collaboration and thematic alliances—like those focused on climate justice—are vital for learning, shared influence, and tackling structural barriers.
- **Push for Strategy Formulation:** The sector must move from broad discussion to focused, multi-year agendas targeting achievable outcomes, as ad-hoc efforts are no longer sufficient in fast-changing environments.
- **Defend and Expand Civic Space:** Regular dialogues, technical capacity-building, and coordinated policy advocacy are central to protecting and growing civic spaces under threat.



Annexure 1



Programme Schedule

"Building Bridges among Civil Society Organisations: Dialogue across Continents"

Venue: Vishwa Yuvak Kendra, New Delhi

Date: 8th & 9th September, 2025

Day I: September 08, 2025

Time	Session	Moderators	Panelists	Remarks/Notes
8.30-9.00	Registration / Tea			
9.00-11.30	-Welcome Address -Book Launch Video -Panel on "Stay Strong: Global Goals need Civil Society"	Dr. Pallavi Rekhi (Lead-Programmes, VANI) Mr. Harsh Jaitli	-Mr. Harsh Jaitli (CEO, VANI) -Ms. Åsa Månsson (Managing Director, VENRO) Ambassadors (Brazil, Germany, Ethiopia) (Tbc) -Dr. Rajesh Tandon (Founding President, PRIA), -Dr. Nigussu Legesse (Executive Director, CCRDA), -Mr. Henrique Frota (Executive Director, Abong), -Ms. Åsa Månsson	Book Release and Keynote Address
11.30-12.00	Tea/ Coffee			
12.00-1.30	Changing Global Realities: Role of Civil Society	Dr. Jayant Kumar (Former Head of Programs, CASA)	-Mr. A.K. Singh (Director, LEADS) -Mr. Mathew Cherian (Global Ambassador, HelpAge International) -Ms. Anke Kurat (HOD, Global Justice & Sustainable	

This event was developed as part of the VENRO project "Countdown 2030 - Global Goals need Civil Society", in partnership with ABONG, CCRDA & VANI. The project is supported by ENGAGEMENT GLOBAL with funds from the BMZ.



This event was developed as part of the VENRO project "Countdown 2030 - Global Goals need Civil Society", in partnership with ABONG, CCRDA and VANI. The project is supported by ENGAGEMENT GLOBAL with funds from the BMZ.

Supported by the





			Development, VENRO)	
1.30-2.30	Lunch			
2.30-4.00	Reinvent or Fall: Ways for CSOs to Remain Relevant	Mr. Dattatray Patil (Executive Director, YRA)	-Dr. Mazher Hussain (Executive Director, COVA), -Dr. Nigussu Legesse, -Ms. Jaswant Kaur (Founder Director, UdayKriti Foundation)	
4.00-4.30	Tea/ Coffee			
4.30-6.00	Creating Space for Multi-stakeholder Engagement	Mr. Henrique Frota	-Dr. K.K. Upadhyay (Chairperson, Centre for Sustainability & CSR at Birla Institute of Management Technology) -Dr. S.K. Gupta (CEO, ICMAI), -Mr. Jagadananda (Mentor & Co-Founder, CYSD), -Mr. Rakesh Katal (Country Director, WHH), -Ms. Meenakshi Batra (Board Member, VANI)	

Day II: September 09, 2025

Time	Session	Moderators	Speakers	Remarks/Notes
9.00-9.30	Registration Tea/ Coffee			
9.30-11.00	Articulating Voices from Local to Global	Mr. C.S. Reddy (Founder & CEO, APMAS)	-Mr. Henrique Frota, -Dr. Jyotsna Mohan Singh (Advocacy Officer, Forum International) -Ms. Hemal Kamat (Director, Concept Sansthan) -Mr. Jaydeep Biswas (Chief of Policy Advocacy and	

This event was developed as part of the VENRO project "Countdown 2030 - Global Goals need Civil Society", in partnership with ABONG, CCRDA & VANI. The project is supported by ENGAGEMENT GLOBAL with funds from the BMZ.



This event was developed as part of the VENRO project "Countdown 2030 - Global Goals need Civil Society", in partnership with ABONG, CCRDA and VANI. The project is supported by ENGAGEMENT GLOBAL with funds from the BMZ.

Supported by the



