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Expert Seminar “The Future of Civil Society Development Organisations” November 10-11, 2009

Minutes of the keynote speech by

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Processes and factors that help or hinder the development of the role of CSOs

A key factor in the role of CSOs is the political regime they operate under. The roles of CSOs are different in different political systems. What drives civil society is different in dictatorships and in democratically based political frameworks. In the first one, civil society is usually in opposition to the regime, while in democracies, civil society may be opposed to the government on certain issues but does not normally aim to change the political system. In dictatorships, civil society has to fight for fundamental freedoms, in democracies CSOs can be formed and express their views freely. Importantly, there are many shades in – between.

Unfortunately over the past years a world-wide trend can be observed in which autocratic and semi-autocratic regimes adopt legislation that seriously restricts the space for CSOs and civil society. The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law is based in Washington and has published a number of publications relevant to the topic. The report “Defending Civil Society” looked closely at legislation that affects NGOs in different regions/countries of the world (<http://www.icnl.org/knowledge/news/2008/3-21.htm>). It showed that almost 60 countries have recently introduced legislation which negatively affects CSOs – with regard to NGO registration, working operations of NGOs and the like. One cannot talk in the same way about the issue of a code of conduct in Europe or in a country where NGOs are considered to have to be controlled by the government.

In my view, the question of similarities and differences between old and new EU member states is not as important as the question of what specific role CSOs in Central and Eastern Europe can play for building democracy and a society which is enabling CSO engagement. There are roles to play:

For situations in countries with dictatorship, the pre-1989 history can be looked at. Although the transition experience is sometimes a bit overemphasized and contexts are very different in different countries, there is still a lot of experience on how to build and strengthen civil society in such repressive systems. This experience can be relevant for CSOs in e.g. Belarus or Kuba.

As for countries with less developed economies but generally open and democratic governments, Central European CSOs have relevant experiences in terms of government and CSO relations, but also on how to develop a philanthropic culture, how to promote volunteering, or participation of CSOs in welfare services provision. All this knowledge can be relevant for other countries although it is not yet fully researched and consistently put into learning material.

The legal environment for CSOs is a major factor at the European level as well. We have to be aware of what are now in the EU the key concerns regarding the legal framework for NGOs. For example, the EC, DG Justice, is working on introducing a “code of conduct” for CSOs; financial regulations concerning CSO funding are debated; We have to ask, whether development CSOs are concerned about these developments and whether they have the capacity to improve their own environment?

To the question of culture: this plays a major role in development and the role of CSOs. I find it pretentious from Western (Northern) CSOs that we should warn ourselves to transfer and impose the Western values in other countries. Actually, it is what most of us have been trying to do. There is often a very thin line between the Western and so-called “universal” values. Calling them “universal” may sound better but in fact, we are trying to change values in cultures that do not respect fundamental human rights, that do not respect women, disabled, minorities etc., the same way we used to and often still aim to do in our own societies. Social change is in a big way about changing values. From Eastern Europe, we have the experience that a lot of values did not take roots – e.g. with regard to corruption: we would like to get rid of it, but it is deeply rooted and hard to deal with.

Related to the rule of law, but also distinct from it is the question of culture of citizenship. Citizenship is not just about voting and tax paying, but about being an engaged member of society with rights and responsibilities. There is often a lack of a “citizenship culture” that includes responsibility in terms of taking responsibility for my own life, while respecting law and other peoples rights. The so-called “rights based approach” to development, in my opinion, focuses too much on rights in the form of demands from the state and too little on responsibilities in the form of taking an active part in dealing with the problems all around us – regardless of the state.

In the presentation about definitions of CSOs, Vince Caruana raised the question whether it is good or bad that CSOs supplement the state. In some countries, the state is so weak and inefficient that it is time for CSOs to start to supplement the state and take responsibility; then citizens can really have demands on the state.

Where is the power? Citizenship needs to be learned, it is always a process. Only a strong citizenship which is active and conscious can talk about having power. In many cases, therefore, I would argue that the role of CSOs is to help develop this kind of responsibility, this kind of understanding of citizenship amongst the local people – until that happens, CSOs will be less able to affect social change.