

Seven reasons to believe this is our moment, civil society

As economic growth stutters in emerging economies and remains a distant mirage in the developed world, millions face their bleakest prospects in decades.

Unemployment, homelessness, cutbacks in basic services, growing inequality, rising prices, social unrest, and increasing violence against the most vulnerable are all threatening to roll back the limited progress achieved on the Millennium Development Goals and erode a social contract that was civil society's crowning achievement of the last century. Hard won human rights and civil liberties are under threat even in countries upheld as beacons of progressive democracy.

Civil society has seen the effects of the financial crisis compound the assault on freedoms justified by the global war on terror. These have now been overlaid, in the wake of Wikileaks and the Arab Spring, with new attacks on freedom of expression on every continent. In almost every country dissent is being criminalised, non-violent protest crushed and penalties for challenges to authority escalated.

New laws that empower governments and business at the expense of citizens spring up as quickly as older versions are decapitated. Civil society actors worldwide find themselves abandoned to the tender mercies of tyrants by an international community focused on domestic concerns, indifferent to environmental impact in the face of economic pressures, and willing to turn a blind eye to the actions of their new economic partners.

Where, in that landscape of pervasive gloom, is there cause for optimism? I believe there are at least seven substantive reasons to believe that we, as civil society, are in the midst of a once-in-a-generation opportunity to advance our shared goals.

Economic paradigm shift:

The longevity of the financial crisis and its social consequences have demonstrated the limitations of the market-fundamentalist paradigm of globalisation. As the crises have dragged on, the gap between the 1% and the 99% has become starkly visible even to ardent champions of free-market economics. Billionaires, pundits and citizens alike increasingly recognise the structural flaws of the pursuit of profit at any cost that impoverishes lives and imperils our planet. Persistent advocacy from renowned economists and civil society groups – the Occupy/Indignado movement, in particular – has finally placed inequality on the agenda.

Recognition of root causes:

The sheer criminality, resistance to reform and utter lack of remorse of financial institutions, and the toxic nexus between big business, big media and politics have exposed the plutocratic capture of assets, voice and institutions of governance that underpin the prevailing predatory model and focused energies on the common cause of our problems.

New constituencies:

The use of social networks as a medium for social action reflects the kindling of interest among young and middle-class people around the world in the exercise of citizenship. The outrage of those young people and the middle classes directly impacted by austerity measures, corruption and cronyism has been met by knee-jerk authoritarian responses, further expanding the constituency for civil society. Successes against tyrants, mega-corporations and regressive legislation have fuelled agency and ambition, continually expanding the range of the possible.



Ingrid Srinath at INTRAC's 20th Anniversary Conference in December 2011

Social networks:

The spread of communication technologies – mobile phones, in particular – are permitting groups once muted by location, culture or economic conditions, access to a range of citizen actions from e-governance to citizen journalism and even the crowdsourcing of a new constitution. Previously excluded groups can increasingly find voice, resources and critical mass through new technologies. Coupled with the proliferation of human networks, these tools have massively increased the scale, speed and scope of civil society engagement and introduced new worldviews, values and strategies to civil society.

New norms of success:

Visible gaps in an economic model that had assumed unchallenged supremacy have also led to growing re-examination of the norms and metrics of success. Assisted by increasing recognition of the looming climate crisis, this has lent momentum to the demands for measures of progress beyond GDP or the bottom-line. As people seek more wholesome lifestyles, definitions of work, career, community and citizenship are being re-negotiated.

Trust:

A major casualty of the crises has been trust in institutions. Revelations of

malfeasance by senior figures in politics, business, international institutions and the media, and their collective failure, together with academics and other experts, to predict the crises or manage their impact, have discredited these sectors and subjected their authority to greater scrutiny. Civil society is consistently trusted far more than government, business and the media at a time when trust is by far the most valuable currency.

Geo-politics:

Finally, the crises, and the recognition of interdependence they have made obvious, have accelerated shifts in global power, opening up greater possibilities for multi-polarity in global decision-making. Though the immediate consequence of these shifts is stasis in global decision-making, they have also brought new impetus and voices to the long overdue reform of global institutions. Despite resistance from incumbents, the progress towards more legitimate, equitable and inclusive institutions is inexorable.

It is all too easy for civil society practitioners, especially those who shaped the great successes of the last century, to despair at recent trends. Utopianism is scarcely a rational alternative. We still face a protracted battle between obsolete notions of top-down, technocratic systems and emergent bottom-up, participatory ones.

Nonetheless, on every continent and in every sector, we have within our grasp a chance at redistribution of power that, while nascent, fragile and fiercely contested, promises quantum advances in equity, accountability, sustainability and freedom. We may just be at that moment Seamus Heaney described when “once in a lifetime the longed for tidal wave of justice can rise up, and hope and history rhyme.”

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