PART II

Chapter 6

Putting the last first? Civil society’s role in leaving no one behind

by

Suhani Bhushan, Karin Fällman, Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah and Wolfgang Jamann*

Civil society organisations already play pivotal roles in identifying who is being left behind, in undertaking programmes to support them, in filling data gaps, and in advocating for groups that are not otherwise seen or heard. This chapter recognises the necessity of civil society in the effort to leave no one behind and sets out an agenda to enable this role. It identifies the obstacles that prevent civil society from fulfilling its potential to serve and stand up for the marginalised – including restrictions on civic space and ineffective funding structures. The chapter explores how governments, donors and civil society itself can create an enabling environment where all voices are heard and no one is left behind.

This chapter also includes an opinion piece by Kumi Naidoo, Founding Chair of African Rising for Justice, Peace and Dignity movement and by Coumba Toure and Muhammed Lamin Saidykhan, Co-Movement Co-ordinators, on “The role of African civil society organisations in leaving no one behind”.

* Suhani Bhushan and Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah from CIVICUS, Karin Fällman from OECD Development Co-operation Directorate and Wolfgang Jamann from The International Civil Society Centre
Civil society organisations (CSOs), with their links to different types of communities, are uniquely placed to identify who is being left behind.

Governments, donors and civil society itself should promote an enabling environment for civil society, pushing back against shrinking civic space and restructuring civil society funding.

Greater investment in subnational initiatives will lead to better chances for airing and answering the concerns of marginalised groups including through voluntary national reviews.

Shift power towards the poorest of the poor, to enable empowerment and dignity in development. For northern CSOs, this may include sharing more roles and decision-making with southern partners and being prepared to let local civil society take over the job.

Protect, nurture and resource CSOs and civic initiatives that are closer to the ground, as these tend to be at the front line of supporting marginalised groups.
The commitment to leave no one behind is arguably the best reminder of the central role that civil society needs to play in the delivery of the SDGs. This pledge to put people at the centre of the 2030 Agenda plays to the strengths of civil society: its connections to communities, its ongoing work to identify who is being marginalised or excluded, its commitment to amplifying unheard voices, and its focus on advocacy and accountability.

Despite impressive progress in some parts of the world, an estimated 736 million people remain in extreme poverty, living on less than USD 1.90 per day. Fragile and conflict-affected countries, states and contexts typically have the highest poverty rates, and in the future, extreme poverty is likely to be concentrated in fragile countries (OECD, 2018[1]) (Chapter 3). Poor and marginalised people face daily exclusion, violence and discrimination because of their social characteristics. However, not all exclusion is poverty related; people can face stigma, discrimination and limited opportunities due to other structural or societal obstacles and differences.

Civil society is already committed to leaving no one behind

In the three years since the SDGs were agreed, many in civil society have already been focusing on this commitment to put the first last. For example, the Leave No One Behind Partnership, which involved CIVICUS, Development Initiatives, Project Everyone and civil society partners within the Action for Sustainable Development platform, mobilised thousands of stakeholders in over 30 countries during 2016 and 2017. These partners convened national dialogues and conducted research to identify what it means to leave no one behind in different countries and contexts. The initiative provided an opportunity to mobilise citizens around those who were most at risk of being left behind in their communities and build momentum for civil society to engage in and monitor SDG implementation (Box 6.1). It also gave governments policy proposals on how to better serve those left behind as national partners and coalitions shared insights from the national dialogues.

Box 6.1. Civil society organisations in the 2017-18 voluntary national reviews in five countries

Civil society organisations (CSOs) report positive outcomes from their dialogues and co-operation with governments in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) voluntary national review processes in Bangladesh, India, Kenya, Nepal and Viet Nam. For example, the government of Kenya invited CSOs and other development partners to work on the country’s SDG progress review and included CSOs’ contributions, along with a comprehensive leave no one behind analysis, in the official progress report. The CSO platform SDG Kenya Forum included numerous national CSOs as well as international CSOs like ActionAid and Voluntary Service Overseas. It co-ordinated civil society’s input and produced a CSO voluntary review report that was accounted for in Kenya’s official report and presented as an annex. CSOs were also part of Kenya’s official delegation to the United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

The following lessons emerged from the dialogues in the five countries:

- including the perspective of marginalised communities in the dialogues is essential, but an area for improvement in many countries;
- a national-level analysis of leave no one behind requires more inclusive and evidence-based approaches to account for the voices of marginalised communities and groups at the local level; and,
- data contributions of communities and volunteers must receive official recognition.

Other examples have included the national campaigning organisation to hold the government accountable for the promise to end poverty and discrimination in India, “Wada Na Todo Abhiyan”; the P20 Initiative of Development Initiatives; and the Leave No One Behind Project of the International Civil Society Centre. Inter-sectoral dialogues, participatory processes, and the increased application of the principle of social accountability, i.e. the direct involvement of citizens in decision making, are key drivers in this context.
Civil society can reach the most marginalised

CSOs, with their links to different types of communities, are uniquely placed to identify who is being left behind. Civil society often reaches areas that are forgotten or left behind by government agencies. In some cases, national censuses only collect a limited set of information to guide policy frameworks, which can be complemented with civil society and citizen-generated data that reflects grassroots communities and hidden populations. In other cases, governments do not recognise certain marginalised groups, or even render them illegal. For instance, homosexuality is criminalised in over 70 countries, including 40 of 53 Commonwealth member states (Kaleidoscope Trust, 2015[2]). If marginalised groups are not recognised or are even criminalised, they are not able to access services and support to alleviate their community challenges. Civil society can play a key role here in recognising these groups, and in providing services and advocating on their behalf to avoid direct legal implications for the community. This is especially true in fragile states where corruption, disregard for the rule of law and weak infrastructure provide little support for most citizens, let alone marginalised communities (OECD, 2018[1]; Jones and Howarth, 2012[3]; Taylor and Taylor, 2016[4]).

Civil society also plays an important role in encouraging active citizenship, particularly among marginalised groups who need help to express and advocate their views. Moreover, by working directly with marginalised communities, civil society can provide services – including humanitarian assistance – that not only complement the state’s, but also showcase innovations that the state can scale up. Indeed, because of their marginalised status, local communities often find highly innovative and flexible responses to adverse conditions; CSOs can help development actors (including governmental ones) target such community-based innovations.

Civil society also plays a central role around accountability for governments and other decision-making bodies. In this role, civil society can not only act as a watchdog, but can also present policy alternatives and innovations. When government agencies include civil society (most often in the form of national platforms) in policy development, the policy trajectory becomes more sustainable and easier to implement across different sectors. This has been demonstrated in the voluntary national review process at the High-Level Political Forum each year (CCIC, 2017[5]). Countries that included civil society in the creation of their plans to achieve the SDGs and leave no one behind produced more concrete and sustainable policy recommendations than countries that did not include civil society in the drafting process, and marginalised communities were represented at a higher rate with civil society’s input. Having civil society engage with national policy implementation provides an immediate accountability mechanism to see if plans are in fact being implemented to reach those furthest behind and if these plans are effective.

The SDGs call on civil society to tackle social and political, as well as economic, marginalisation; to amplify the voices of those who are not ordinarily heard; and to create a system in which people are empowered to shape their own communities. Civil society has a critical role to play in mobilising to make these global goals relevant, useful and powerful for local actors.

An agenda to enable civil society

Although civil society plays a critical role in the delivery of the leave no one behind agenda, there are many factors that hinder its potential impact. Most of the obstacles can be attributed to challenges in the environment for civil society: legal and regulatory parameters; spaces for civil society engagement in policy dialogues; funding structures; and civil society’s own development effectiveness, accountability and transparency.

Push back against shrinking civic space

A functioning civil society relies on the freedoms of association, assembly and expression. Together, these freedoms define the parameters of civic space: the arena in which civil society can exist and the bedrock of any open and democratic society. When civic space is open, citizens and CSOs are able to
organise, participate and communicate without hindrance; they are able to claim their rights and to influence the political and social structures around them. A free, vibrant civil society, operating within open civic space, plays a critical role in stemming tides of extremism, intolerance and exclusion – yet often it is something appreciated only when it starts to disappear. Worryingly, in far too many countries and in all regions of the world, civic freedoms are under increasing pressure (Figures 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3). The freedom of citizens to protest, mobilise and speak out is being contested and restricted. Data from the CIVICUS Monitor shows that more than 3 billion people live in countries where civic space is repressed or closed, and in March 2018 the monitor reported 109 countries having closed, repressed or obstructed civic space (CIVICUS, 2018[6]).

*Figure 6.1. Civic space by global population*

Civic space by global population

- 28% CLOSED
- 17% REPRESSED
- 37% OBSTRUCTED
- 14% NARROWED
- 4% OPEN


*Figure 6.2. 109 countries have closed, repressed or obstructed civic space*

Space for multi-stakeholder dialogue is a key element of civic space. To benefit from civil society’s insight and experience, CSOs must have access to multi-stakeholder dialogues where they can contribute to defining and monitoring public policies. Giving CSOs access to policy dialogue furthermore supports people’s empowerment and democratic ownership over the policies and development initiatives that affect their lives. Evidence, however, shows that although many governments consult CSOs on the design, implementation and monitoring of national development policies, the quality of engagement varies. The factors that diminish the effectiveness of consultations in influencing national policies include difficult or polarised political contexts, fragility and conflict, ad hoc consultation mechanisms, and a lack of co-ordination mechanisms to ensure broad-based CSO representation (OECD/UNDP, 2016[7]; (CPDE, 2016[8]).

Much of the critical role that civil society will need to play in implementing the SDGs depends on the ability to push back against the narrowing of civic space around the world. It is heartening to see efforts to defend civil society rights from a variety of actors, including some governments, multi-stakeholder initiatives and even some businesses. A key objective in the push-back will be to develop strong, accessible messaging around why civic space matters and the roles citizens can play in defending it. Civil society and its supporters will need to engage in international processes to support norms and structures that uphold civic space, and work to see the same standards applied at national levels. Equally, at a time when the role, independence and importance of civil society is being questioned in many countries, civil society itself will need to maintain the highest standards of integrity, developing its own capacity to demonstrate transparency and accountability so that it is in a position to rebut any criticisms that undermine its legitimacy.

**Change funding structures**

To enable civil society to push back against the narrowing civic space and develop its own capacity to demonstrate transparency and accountability, existing funding structures should be revisited and reconstructed. Current funding tends to be donor-driven; to encourage civil society to compete with
itself for the resources available; and to favour international and donor-country-based organisations. Donor-directed programmes are inclined to partner with organisations that can roll out the vision and plans of a donor through their capacities and networks. In 2016, Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members reported 12% of their official development assistance (ODA) as aid through CSOs, and only 2% as aid to CSOs, i.e. aid for programmes initiated by the CSOs themselves (OECD, 2018[9]; OECD, 2018[10]). This limits civil society’s momentum, creative control, ownership and impact and entails a top-down approach to development. Additionally, providing funding to some aspects of civil society over others creates competition that can inhibit or distort co-operation between CSOs operating in the same space for the same goals of leaving no one behind. Private and government donors also tend to favour donor-country-based or international organisations. In 2016, these CSOs in the global North received 11 times as much ODA as Southern CSOs (OECD, 2018[10]).

Building a diverse and resilient civil society that serves marginalised communities will require a shift of these resources towards initiatives that are locally anchored and nourish civil society at ground level. For example, an honest and comprehensive overview of the relative advantages of direct and indirect funding to CSOs is required, avoiding the risks of undermining CSO-CSO relationships or creating unnecessary competition, but taking account of the current reality of the state and aspirations of civil society in every country (Wood and Fällman, 2013[11]). Moreover, as pointed out by the OECD, supporters of civil society should strive to increase the share of core support aligned with CSOs’ own systems and priorities, and make capacity development of civil society in the South a key condition (OECD, 2012[12]). The OECD is currently conducting a study of DAC members’ work with civil society in view of developing good practice guidance for more effective and efficient funding structures and relations with civil society.

**Support local-level interventions**

An important tactic identified in national consultations for overcoming geographic inequalities is to empower local-level interventions and connect directly with marginalised groups in their communities. According to a recent CIVICUS survey and round of national dialogues, most mobilisation and engagement of marginalised groups is found at the local community level. This indicates that when it comes to empowering and engaging marginalised groups in country-level SDG strategy and implementation, civil society and its supporters should target people and organisations at the community level to build on the influence and momentum already at their disposal, as well as to ensure that the effects are sustainable, have local impact and reach those most in need.

Civil society has roles to play in both delivering services and in promoting long-term social transformation. Local resourcing has the potential to tick both boxes. Supporting local CSOs, based in the communities they seek to serve, satisfies many of the technical efficiency criteria that are so important to the allocation of development resources. But going local is also about more than technical efficiency and development impact; it is about a political, transformative power shift. Localisation means distributing a greater share of resources to local actors and giving them greater control over how these resources are spent. There has been no shortage of commitments to localisation in recent years, including the Grand Bargain and the Global Partnership of Effective Development Co-operation. Yet despite these commitments, very few concrete measures have made a difference. Donors and CSOs need to find new mechanisms for channelling resources quickly and flexibly to national and local actors if they wish to strengthen the institutions close to those who are at risk of being left behind.

Indeed, if development actors are interested in building local capacity and long-term impact, investing in new development modalities like community philanthropy and local sub-granting organisations should be a priority (Hodgson and Pond, 2018[14]). This will require a nuanced approach and an honest acknowledgement of the politics embedded in their support. Above all, it will require a willingness to use their power to shift unequal power structures on the ground.
Figure 6.4. Can marginalised groups influence policy making, and at what level(s) of governance?

Note: For more information see: https://action4sd.org/leavenoonebehind.


**Shift powers within civil society**

This will be a particular challenge and task for Northern CSOs. They will have to engage in different types of partnerships with local actors which will go beyond sub-granting arrangements to include role sharing and the strengthening of local structures. A shift of power within their (often federated) structures towards the global South, and more inclusive routes to programming decisions, are the ways forward. Northern CSOs should also not shy away from necessary role changes – integrating domestic operations and advocacy more into their core and working themselves out of their job in countries where local civil society becomes ready to take over.

Within this radically changed development context, civil society must embrace a new way of working. The old, or perhaps existing, global campaigns were largely Northern-led and aimed at influencing global targets and Northern governments. New models of campaigning – if they are to align with the SDG era – will need to be networked, bottom-up, decentralised, and more often than not designed, led and owned by local actors.
In my view: The role of African civil society organisations in leaving no one behind

by Kumi Naidoo, Coumba Toure and Muhammed Lamin Saidykhan,
Co-Movement Coordinators, Africans Rising for Justice, Peace & Dignity

Africans Rising is a movement that aspires to facilitate the creation and strengthening of multidisciplinary networks of civil society organisations in Africa and in the diaspora, helping these organisations learn from and support each other as they pursue justice, peace and dignity for all Africans. We have followed the global pledge to leave no one behind with interest – through the eyes of African civil society, which has long practised the pledge, under this and other names.

Africans have not only been left behind in the race to development; we were never in the race in the first place. We are expected to run for a trophy that we never asked for. And as we try to find our place in this template of development, we continue to be systematically marginalised.

Only a small percentage of Africans on the continent and in the diaspora can claim to live in justice, peace or dignity. Most do not have access to basic food security in terms of quality or quantity. As we write, famine looms over African farmers who depend on unpredictable rains to cultivate their crops and feed their families. South Africans continue to challenge the vestiges of their country’s colonial past, especially when it comes to the massively unjust expropriation of land without compensation. Women in the western region of Cameroon share horror stories of attacks by military officers, amid other ramifications of the insurrections. Young Ugandans are dying in the struggle to protect their constitution. In many countries, including Burundi, Togo and the Democratic Republic of Congo, people are being killed for condemning corruption and demanding good governance.

The legacy of colonialism has left profound scars. Countries continue to be in debt to the global North, with their disadvantages exacerbated by predatory capitalism and the persistence of programmes that have had a clearly negative impact on some or all of their people. The post-colonial era has been marred by recurring examples of governments acting in their own interests and at the expense of marginalised populations – sometimes, at the expense of nearly everyone.

Yet we do not have the luxury of wallowing in our past. Africa has plentiful, youthful human capital with the ability to transform the continent both politically and economically. The call to leave no one behind is a call to acknowledge this, and to recognise that African people deserve dignity and prosperity, whether they are women, LGBTQ, disabled, illiterate, poor, young or old. It is also a call to end the reaping of our continent’s natural resources. It means promoting equitable and sustainable development that is designed and owned by African people nationally, regionally and globally.

It is the role of civil society to act for those left behind; to defend human rights and expose injustices. Africans Rising connects, unites and amplifies the voices of Africans who are fighting for democracy, promoting alternative development models and working to ensure access to justice across the continent and in the diaspora. It is our role to change the way history is written, to challenge existing systems for collective benefits and to light new sparks of hope.

We remain committed to supporting the many individuals, movements and organisations courageously working for justice, peace and dignity across communities and countries in Africa. This means connecting people to each other and directly to the resources they need to carry out their work, for it is African people who are on the front lines and at the intersections of struggles. Marginalised people cannot avoid every crisis, but if those affected are already well organised and part of a network of local and transnational civil society organisations, the impact – no matter how catastrophic – can be significantly reduced. Similarly, it will only be possible for Africa and Africans to rise out of marginalisation altogether with a well-organised, connected and cohesive civil society, solidly rooted in our communities.
Conclusion

In order to truly implement the leave no one behind agenda, we need to promote an enabling environment for civil society that includes greater investment in subnational initiatives and a power shift towards the poorest of the poor. Within such an environment, civil society will be able to properly connect marginalised populations with different sectors and government branches and implement practical changes. Civil society is uniquely placed to engage simultaneously in multiple functions that are key to the SDGs (engagement, advocacy, accountability and implementation), at multiple levels (local, national, regional and global) and on multiple fronts (with the public, the media, governments and the corporate world), as is demonstrated through its encouraging involvement in the voluntary national review processes.

Additionally, by shifting existing funding structures to focus more on the poorest of the poor, the development landscape will be able to empower marginalised populations to control their own involvement in national and local policy making. The leave no one behind agenda requires co-operation from multiple actors in multiple sectors to push this global movement forward.

Notes

1. World Bank PovcalNet (http://iresearch.worldbank.org/PovcalNet/povOnDemand.aspx). In October 2015, the World Bank updated the international poverty line from USD 1.25 a day (at 2005 international prices) to USD 1.90 a day (at 2011 international prices). According to Development Initiatives (2016), “In 2012, (the most recent year of country-comparable poverty data), an estimated 76% of people living in extreme poverty – on less than USD 1.90 a day – were living in countries that were either politically fragile (32%), environmentally vulnerable (32%) or both (12%). This is approximately 677 million people being ‘left behind’”.


4. Recognising that CSOs have a responsibility for accountability to varied stakeholders, including governments in CSOs’ countries of operation; development co-operation providers and other funders of CSOs; CSOs’ boards; CSOs’ constituencies and beneficiaries; and CSO principles and standards such as the Istanbul Principles for CSO Development Effectiveness.

5. See, for example, beneficiary/partner-oriented accountability mechanisms like the CHS Alliance (www.chsalliance.org) or the people-powered decision making of Accountable Now (http://accountablenow.org/future-accountability/people-powered-decision-making).

References


