**CSO STRENGTHNING; The shrinking civic space**

**INTRODUCTION**

A free and open civil society is critical to hold governments to account and to deliver on development’s aim of better equality and poverty reduction. Yet recent years have witnessed an alarming rise in restrictions placed on civil society’s ability to operate, including in developing countries, to the extent that some have described the phenomenon as a ‘global emergency’. As a result of these trends, citizens are finding it harder to hold their political leaders to account.

Veltmeyer H. (December, 2008)

**POLICY PROBLEM (Shrinking Civil Society Space)**

In recent years, the space for civil society to fulfil this essential function has been rapidly closing. New laws and policies constraining freedom of association and assembly have spread with viral speed, while crackdowns on freedom of expression and political dissent have become alarmingly common. In 2015, a study carried out by European Foundation Centre shows serious threats to one or more civic freedoms were reported in over 100 countries. as a result of these laws, international development, humanitarian groups and their local partners are being vilified, harassed, closed down and expelled.

European Foundation Centre, (2017).

**Where is it happening?**

The shrinking civil space is a global phenomenon. The introduction of laws, policies and practices by states to restrict civil society is happening in all parts of the world, including both established democracies as well as emerging and post-conflict economies, although it varies in intensity in different part of the world with the third world and the developing countries been hit the most. According to the **Civicus Monitor**, which aims to track and share reliable, up-to-date data on the state of civil society freedoms around the world, there are only 22 countries remaining where the state both enables and safeguards the enjoyment of civil society space for all people. Of these, 19 are in Europe, two are in Oceania and one in the Americas. Currently, there are no open countries in Africa and Asia. d This means that civil society is restricted in almost every country where aid agencies operate, making the ability to operate increasingly difficult. CIVICUS, (22, April 2015).

**How is it happening?**

These includes internal vulnerabilities that limits the capacity of organizations to effectively address threatening challenges;

It includes

* Weak Leverage of Networks & Connections
* Financial Constraints
* Unresponsive Organizational & Leadership Models
*

The external influence majorly focuses on the closing down of civil society space by governments via a diverse array of laws, policies and tactics designed to monitor, restrict or harass NGOs, community-based organisations and social movements, these includes;

* Crack downs on freedom of assembly and freedom of speech
* Legislative measures restricting how and where civil society organisations (CSOs) are allowed to operate
* New bureaucratic and/or financial transparency burdens on CSOs

**Why is it happening?**

Civic space shrink as social contracts between citizens and states are dismantled. The drivers behind these various measures are manifold, but include the rise of authoritarian and populist governments, the misuse of counter-terrorism discourse by overly restrictive regulation and measures, the enactment of disproportionate measures to prevent criminal financing and money laundering.

**IMPACTS OF THE SHRINKING CVIL SPACE**

The following are the impacts of the shrinking civic space;

* funding restrictions and administrative burdens
* limiting operational effectiveness,
* vilification and divisiveness
* creating security risks to local staff
* political interference

**ANALYSIS**

**RESPONSES TO THE CRISIS**

**Global effort**

The following listed are some of the highlighted efforts at the Global level;

* Most international philanthropic foundations and INGOs who act as intermediary funders are taking an ‘adaptation and mitigation’ approach to these constraints.
* As a last resort, funders and INGOs are making the painful choice of pulling out of difficult operating environments altogether. When this happens, local civil society is left bereft of critical resources to do their work, resulting in a smaller, deflated and ultimately less effective civil society to underpin development.
* Organizations such as **Africa Platform, The Civic Space Initiative (CSI) have engaged in a**dvocacy, technical assistance and engagement with the government, Resilency program by Partners Global
* Other responses include changing organisational structures, changing partner relationships, and reframing grant programmes among others.

**National effort**

The following are some of the notable national responses

* Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Nigeria are extremely concerned about the proposed NGO Bill. Therefore, CSOs have carried out advocacy work with the leadership of the National Assembly and the House Committee. There was also an in-depth analysis of the bill and its implications for civil society and briefs were shared with the sponsor of the bill and the House Committee on CSOs.
* There was a joint peaceful march organised in Abuja and Lagos by CSOs, asking the Lagos state government to make a request to the National Assembly not to consider the bill.
* The Nigeria Network of NGOs also created a platform through its annual conference for engaging with regulators in Nigeria to strengthen existing laws.
* A review of the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA), the law guiding civil society registration in Nigeria was done and recommendations were made to the Corporate Affairs Commission and Senate Technical Committee to review of CAMA
* Based on a blog post released by the organization, Partners West Africa Nigeria (PWAN) which is also a CSO is of the view that there is no need for the establishment of an NGO Regulatory Commission, as most of the roles that are ascribed in the proposed Bill fall within the purview and mandate of the already existing government institutions, such as the Corporate Affairs Commission and other agencies referred to in the Bill.

PWAN (December, 2017).

**TAKEAWAYS**

* When the CSOs came together to speak against the bill, it did not go through. Therefore, CSOs need to stick toger and cooperate against policies harmful to the society i.e. policies harmful to CSOs affect the society negatively.
* Adaptation and mitigation is not the best response to unfavorable policies but speak up for what they want. International communities need to also step in.

**Way forward**

To expand the civic pace, the following should be considered;

* Building capacity and resilience for local civil society to push back
* Strengthening advocacy efforts
* Find opportunities to influence those in power
* Explore alternative funding
* Build bridges with other CSOs

 **Conclusion**

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights:

“If space exists for civil society to engage, there is a greater likelihood that all rights will be better protected. Conversely, the closing of civil society space, and threats and reprisals against civil society, are early warning signs of instability.” Civic space is the cornerstone of a healthy society that champions democratic principles and ideals, and an essential component for the promotion and advancement of human rights and fulfillment of basic human needs. We need to push back to expanding the civic space.

Zeid Raad Al Hussein, (2017)

# References

CIVICUS. (2015, April 22nd). *civicus media resources.* Retrieved from www.civicus.org: https://www.civicus.org/index.php/fr/medias-ressources/122-news/interviews/3043-nigeria-if-passed-the-ngo-bill-will-reduce-the-ability-of-csos-to-hold-the-government-accountable-and-ensure-that-human-rights-are-respected

European Foundation Centre. (2017). *European Foundation centre. org.* Retrieved from http://www.efc.be: https://efc.issuelab.org/resources/29212/29212.pdf

Netherlands, M. o. (2019). Strengthening Civil Theory of Change. *Supporting civil society’s political role*. Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/PWA%20NIG%201/Downloads/Annex+5+(Engels)+-+Strengthening+Civil+Society+-+Theory+of+Change%20(4).pdf

PartnersGlobal. (2020, February 3). *PartnersGlobal newsroom.* Retrieved from www.partnersglobal.org: https://www.partnersglobal.org/newsroom/5-ways-civil-society-can-build-resiliency-as-civic-space-changes/

PWAN. (2017, December). *Partners West Africa Memorandum on the NGO regulatory bill.* Retrieved from www.partnersnigeria.org: https://www.partnersnigeria.org/pwan-memorandum-on-the-ngo-regulatory-bill/

Veltmeyer, H. (2008, December). *nterações (Campo Grande).* Retrieved from SciELO: http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci\_arttext&pid=S1518-70122008000200010