Emerging civil society

Hyperconnectivity and social media have improved access to information and made it easier for people to organise. At the same time, many countries are experiencing a crisis of trust in government and business, and some governments are now finding it difficult to exercise direct control over civil society, which is using its new found power to build global systems for change.

Across the world, civil society is encouraging higher standards of transparency, monitoring, accountability and representation, and putting more pressure on institutions to act responsibly. [1]

The views of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labour leaders, faith-based organizations, religious leaders and other civil society representatives have also become increasingly important over the past few decades. These groups now have more influence in local, national, regional and international arenas than ever before, leading to a renewed focus on the ways in which government and business can collaborate with civil society.

However, civil society is also becoming more amorphous and decentralised. The sheer number of voices now clamouring for attention can lead to information overload. Those who shout the loudest may be drowning out more nuanced or insightful opinions, and new approaches are needed to build effective coalitions from fragmented, online networks that lack clearly defined leaders.

Footnotes:

1. CIVICUS (2014). State of Civil Society / The great challenges of the 21st century, foreword.

Implications

- The loss of trust in large institutions and increasing power of civil society will change how organisations generate and maintain their 'licence to operate'. But if civil society becomes more amorphous and decentralised, it may be difficult to include it at the negotiating table – an issue that would affect every level of governance problem solving, from community decisions through to global multilateral processes. As some point new governance systems that address this issue may be needed.

- The blurring of traditional roles will create new frameworks for collaboration, partnership and innovation where these roles intersect. In fact, we are already seeing the emergence of hybrid organisations (e.g. businesses with a social purpose, civil society groups as market actors). [1]

Footnotes:

1. World Economic Forum (2013). The Future Role of Civil Society Report, pg 10

Current trajectory

- While trust in governments has declined from 52% to 44% and trust in business has plateaued at 56-58% in last three years, NGOs were the most trusted institution in 20 out of the 27 countries surveyed in 2014. Remarkably, NGOs are the most trusted institution for seven years in a row,

according to the Edelman Trust Barometer. The growth in NGO trust is mainly attributed to people and media outlets now relying more heavily on non-traditional sources for information as compare to previous years. [1]

- According to the Yearbook of International Organizations, the number of international NGOs increased from 6,000 in 1990 to more than 50,000 in 2006, reaching 65,000 in 2013. [2] India is noted as having the most registered NGOs (3.3 million), both in total numbers and by per capita. [3]

Footnotes:

1. [Edelman (2014). 2014 Edelman Trust Barometer Executive Summary, pg 3.](#)
2. [Union of International Associations (2013). Yearbook of International Organizations 2012-2013](#)
3. [CIVICUS (2014). State of Civil Society / Reimagining Global Governance Pg. 173-4](#)