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Time for a new social contract: CIVICUS report suggests a generational opportunity in the face of multiple crises

Civil society faces a generational opportunity to prove its value as a source of alternatives at a time of profound global crisis. This is the headline conclusion of the inaugural report on the state of civil society from global civil society network CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation.

David Bonbright, Chair of CIVICUS, sets out the need for a report from civil society: "We cannot be effective if we don't know who we are as civil society. We cannot strengthen what we cannot see. For 20 years, CIVICUS has undertaken cutting edge action research on the dimensions and dynamics of civil society. This report continues this central line of our work as a critical champion and friend of civil society."

The report, the State of Civil Society 2011, available at StateOfCivilSociety.org, concludes that in the face of connected economic, environmental, political and social crises, the institutions of global governance have been revealed as lacking. Meanwhile, state responses to the economic crisis are privileging private capital at the expense of citizens, and accordingly people around the world have risen up to resist poor governance, inequality and corruption, and to demand a change in the circumstances in which they live. Citizens are seeking to define a new social contract. People are also modelling alternate ways of thinking and doing, such as people's assemblies and direct democracy.

The report further sets out that, while the present state of activism is healthy, state pushback continues to threaten activists through violence and judicial harassment, with particular attention now being paid to bloggers and others using the internet for activism. Further, the legal and policy environment for civil society organisations remains largely disabling in many countries. At the same time, many CSOs face an existential crisis: for many, the funding situation is getting worse, and the new people's movements and great wave of activism of 2011 happened largely independently of organised civil society.

"The report tells us that we are at the most pivotal but contested moment for civil society in a generation," says Netsanet Belay, Policy and Research Director at CIVICUS. "Civil society has never been more questioned - but it has also never been more needed. The report shows why business as usual is no longer tenable in response to the crises the world faces."

The solution, the report concludes, can only be in the formation of new, more broad-based, inclusive coalitions and communities that take account of the diversity of civil society and the strengths of different parts of civil society, such as CSOs, community groups, online activists, the new protest movements, faith-based groups and trade unions.

CIVICUS stands ready in response to this analysis to play a global convening role to bring new coalitions together and serve those coalitions, and indeed as part of its process of framing new strategic directions for 2013 to 2017, is already reaching out to different constituencies to formulate a new civil society agenda to respond to current crises and opportunities. CIVICUS will also be taking forward consultations on how to define a new social contract to its annual World Assembly in Montreal, Canada, 3 to 7 September 2012, and beyond.

The report, authored by CIVICUS in collaboration with a wide range of civil society activists and leaders, and other stakeholders, is the first of what will be a regular report tracking the changing shape of civil society and emerging trends in the opportunities, challenges and constraints civil society and people's participation face. The report is available in English language PDF format, and will shortly launch as an interactive website. A French language summary will also be available soon.

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation is a global movement of civil society dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society across the world

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