

Civil Society Role in COVID – 19 Pandemic

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I have seen most of us lost in translation during the past one and a half months. Waiting for things to normalize! We have withdrawn or reviewed how we engage with our governments. They are now in the lead without any measures of accountability. In many countries around the World Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are forced to accept the (potentially unlimited nature of their measures) pronouncements without any questions lest they become unpatriotic, targeted, and labeled critics of the government. This is mostly predominant among the governments in the South.

For many governments however life continues...they are still performing their functions... their duties. They are still formulating policies, regulating social and economic activities, and formulating structures to respond to this pandemic - Covid 19. For addressing this pandemic and many more is why they exist as governments. That is why the civil Society pay taxes so that they can provide leadership, direction and motivation. It is why they must provide for our health and safety. It is why we CSOs must still hold them accountable. In other words, as Civil Society Organisations we must still do our job in these difficult circumstances. We must be the voices of those in lockdown, and those in quarantine. We must speak and protect those in the informal economy where there is no government policy and structures to provide a soft landing. Governments belong to all of us, it must therefore cater for all of us....in policy, in structure and in resourcing.

Adjusting to the “new normal” (which may continue for many months or years as a health crisis) without fully understating their implication for our role in COVID -19 is a disservice to those we seek to enhance their voices in governance and policy processes at these times. We must respond to the challenge of COVID 19 in our own context and not in the framework that increasingly becoming a danger to our freedom of expression, association and most importantly shrinking our civic space in participating in decision making process.

Here are a couple of things I believe we should pay close attention to in these difficult times.

Fighting the COVID - 19 pandemic is not just a health crisis, but has quickly become a political and economic process. It involves negotiation between different interest groups in society over the allocation of health resources, how we are going to engage in the means of production during these times. It is also about how and when we will turn to normalcy. The sad part of this is that we are not part of these discussions across the continent. CSOs can play an important role in shaping the process and the initiatives of the government towards this pandemic both in the health sector and the overall economic management and governance of our countries. We must demand increasing community involvement and creation of avenues and mechanisms for these voices to be heard in decision making

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process. We must demand accountability mechanisms beyond the current predetermined media debriefs. Creating a stronger accountability mechanism should be our clarion call.

Advocating higher levels of public health spending; This pandemic has provided the best opportunity to dismantle World Bank's decades of destruction in our health sectors. Under the structural adjustment programs, our governments were forced to cut health expenditures, introduce cost sharing measures and reduce wage bill in the health sector. The result has been no expansion of health services to the rural areas, fewer community health workers, and very few health service providers including nurses and doctors in the public health sector. These elements provide a perfect storm for the disaster that is waiting.

Our governments must therefore implement a complete policy shift....one that allows for fiscal expansion towards the health sector that includes free access to private health care systems in their response to this pandemic. This is the right time to advocate for it. No one will question any government as they are fighting a pandemic. As CSOs we must demand from our governments, and development partners, to provide financing mechanisms that guarantee access to health services for all vulnerable and people living in poverty during this pandemic.

We must challenge the current strategies that encourage and create risk pools (private insurance coverage) for more privileged groups in society (for example civil servants or people working in the formal sector) especially if these groups are also to be subsidized using public funds. Health public spending should be directed to spreading risks across all the populations.

Beyond the Zoom, Go to Meetings and other social media applications available for our new normal, **there must be full transparency to enable us to be engaged in debates concerning the purchasing of services using public health funds** including the allocation of the government's health budget and good will resources currently being mobilized in the name of COVID 19. We must ensure that allocations are efficient and target the most vulnerable in our society. In particular we should be vigilant regarding balanced allocations that disproportionately benefit tertiary hospital care through the purchase of ventilators at the expense of investing in local primary health care services. We should demand that new and additional public health resources should bring some measure of balance in prevention, promotion and treatment in public health expenditure. This is the time to demand for raising and allocating funds to ensure that high-need and vulnerable groups receive their fair share of benefits and are not contributing unfairly to subsidizing for our economies. These groups include women, children, elderly people, disabled people, poorer members of society, marginalized ethnic groups, people with chronic illnesses and rural communities.