Future Challenges for CSOs:

Conversations with Two Generations of CSO Workers in Asia

ANGOC

Founded in 1979, the Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC) is a regional association of national and regional networks of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Asia actively engaged in promoting food sovereignty, land rights and agrarian reform, sustainable agriculture, participatory governance, and rural development. ANGOC member networks and partners work in 10 Asian countries together with some 3,000 CSOs and community-based organizations (CBOs). ANGOC actively engages in joint field programs and policy discussions with national governments, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and international financial institutions (IFIs).

The complexity of Asian realities and diversity of CSOs highlight the need for a development leadership to service the poor of Asia – providing a forum for articulation of their needs and aspirations as well as expression of Asian values and perspectives. Thus, the ANGOC network promotes land and resource rights, smallholder agriculture, and human rights and civic participation, by serving as a platform for Asian CSOs to generate knowledge, share tools, and conduct constructive policy dialogues.

ANGOC is a member of the Global Land Tool Network (GLTN), Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR), Indigenous Peoples' and Community Conserved Areas and Territories (ICCA) Consortium, the International Land Coalition (ILC), and Fair Finance Asia (FFA).

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Preface

In the last couple of decades, civil society organizations (CSOs) have played an important role all over the world in matters pertaining to good governance, functioning of democracy, upholding of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and protecting vulnerable and under-privileged sections of the community.

However, the development landscape has dramatically changed. While a few nations and sectors tighten their grip on global economic power, the exponential growth of digital technology has revolutionized how things are done and decided. A culture of overconsumption and waste continues amidst poverty and hunger. The impacts of climate change as well as the socio-economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic have altered the way CSOs operate. These changes necessitate a reflection among CSOs on the challenges they face and the directions they need to take in order to remain relevant in society.

At the same time, the entry of a new generation of CSO workers provides an added dimension for reflection. How can CSOs sustain the interest of the youth in development work? What are hindrances faced by the youth within the CSO sector?

The Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC) initiated a series of reflection meetings on *the emerging challenges of Asian CSOs* to provide an opportunity for CSOs to explore the perspectives and concerns of the CSO sector in Asia today.

This paper provides a summary of 15 focus group discussions held among CSO workers in seven Asian countries. While it may not represent the views of the whole CSO sector in the region, it is presented here, to:

- provide a deeper understanding of the *key challenges and responses of the CSO sector* in the Asian region;
- explore *areas of collective action towards strengthening the CSO sector* to become more responsive, effective, and resilient amidst the global constriction of democratic and civic space; and,
- provide Asian CSOs a *venue for reflection and conversation*.

Hopefully, this initiative shall inspire and catalyze further reflection-discussions among CSOs in the region and elsewhere.

We thank the facilitators and the discussants of the focus group discussion held in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines and Sri Lanka. Our appreciation goes to to Fr. Francis Lucas for steering the regional online exchange as well as to the participants of that event. Special thanks to Antonio “Tony” Quizon as our overall editor, for meticulously putting the various discussions together in this paper. Finally, we acknowledge the support provided by Fair Finance Asia for this initial reflection process.

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Future Challenges for CSOs:

Conversations with Two Generations of CSO Workers in Asia[1]

Edited by Tony Quizon, ANGOC

This paper summarizes a series of conversations on the theme of *Future Challenges for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)* involving two generations of CSO workers in seven Asian countries. These conversations took place between July to September 2022, and involved 180 CSO workers (63 women, 117 men) from Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines, and Sri Lanka.

Some 15 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted as part of the ANGOC-implemented project on "*Broadening the CSO Space in Seven Asian Countries*" which aims to assist Asian CSOs in addressing current challenges such as the re-emergence of authoritarianism in government, the constriction of democratic and civic spaces, and the decline in funding for CSOs and development work[2]. The structured reflection process, both in-country and among countries, was designed for CSO leaders to think about the current issues facing the CSO sector, and to discuss possible responses to these.

Each discussion focused on four main topics, guided by specific questions:

- Societal issues being addressed by the CSOs: *What changes in society are you (your CSO) working for, or are hoping to achieve*?
- CSOs and their evolution as a mechanism for social change: *What motivated you to work in CSOs? How has the role of CSOs in society changed? How do these changes, in turn, affect the relevance of CSOs*?
- Internal challenges facing CSOs: *In your view, what are the key internal issues that affect the relevance and viability of CSOs? How are these being addressed*?

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[1] This paper is the product of a collective effort among several CSO researchers and facilitators from seven Asian countries: Arjun Bhattarai and Kiran Shrestha (NFN, Nepal), Irvan Harja (Bina Desa Foundation, Indonesia), Md. Rizwanul Islam (ALRD, Bangladesh), Charika Marasinghe and Emaajine Selvarajah (Sri Lanka), Bisheshwar Mishra and P. Lal (AVARD, India), Jose Ignatius Pagsanghan (ANGOC, Philippines), Nhek Sarin (STAR Kampuchea, Cambodia), and Fr Francis Lucas, Nathaniel Don Marquez, Denise Hyacinth Joy Musni, and Marianne Naungayan (ANGOC). Antonio Quizon of ANGOC took on the role of scribe and editor in piecing together the different discussions into this article.

[2] The project covers two related outputs: Output 1 is a review of the policy and legal environment for CSOs in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines, and Sri Lanka. Such CSO assessment study is published separately under the title *Shrinking Civic Space: The legal and political environment for CSOs in seven Asian countries*. This paper represents Output 2, which summarizes a structured reflection process on *The Future Challenges for CSOs*.

- The next generation of CSO workers: *What are sources of despair and of hope in CSO work? In your view, what are the challenges in building the next generation of CSO workers?*

A brief evaluation of the activity was conducted at the end of each session.

The FGDs consisted of face-to-face and online discussions. Two FGDs were convened for each country, one involving the so-called "first generation" of CSO workers, and another among the "second generation."[3] Discussions were conducted in the local language. One Asia regional online dialogue was also held for CSO leaders of different nationalities and generations. Overall, 99 CSO participants from the first generation, and 81 from the second generation, participated in the process.

The Emergence of Development CSOs in Asian Countries

The emergence, growth and evolution of the CSO development sectors in each country were defined by their respective social and political contexts. In Bangladesh, CSOs emerged after independence in 1971, and the struggle to achieve development and democratization continued amidst a series of military regimes. In Nepal, a decade-long civil war followed by a Peace Accord in 2006, brought about a period of stability and the growth of the CSO sector. The country has since sought to address conflict and to pursue nation-building through democratic reforms and federalism. Sri Lanka has had a long history of CSOs, and the sector sought to address issues arising from civil war and its aftermath (ethnic conflict), various changes in government, and now the challenges of a serious economic crisis. In India, with its long history of voluntary action, many CSOs emerged and grew under the influence of Gandhi's constructive program. The Philippine and Indonesian CSOs share somewhat similar experiences, having to work under a period of authoritarianism and military rule, followed by a wave of democratization that marked a growth of the CSO sector, and then a gradual regression towards more restricted democratic space. In Cambodia, after decades of civil war and foreign occupation, the arrival of UNTAC in 1992 marked the disarmament of factional armies, the end of civil war, the repatriation of refugees, and the transition to democracy. In rebuilding the country, CSOs grew as an important force engaged in service delivery and rights-based work and advocacy.

Quizon, A.B. (2022). Regional Overview: The Legal and Political Space for CSOs in Seven Asian Countries.

[3] The country facilitators differentiated the first and second generations by their age brackets, which varied for each country. Those belonging to the "first generation" ranged from "36 years old and above" (Philippines) to "50 years old and above" (Sri Lanka).

Societal analysis from the perspective of CSOs

What changes in society are you (your CSO) working for, or are hoping to achieve?

There seems to be no difference between the two generations in terms of the changes in society that both are working for.

The pursuit of justice. CSOs seek to address the *core problems* of society, defined as *"unjust social structures"* or *"structural injustices."* Many CSOs view society's problems as being *structural* and *systemic*. Like an "iceberg," only a small part of society's problems is visible, while the complex roots lie beneath the surface. Addressing these unjust structures will require systems thinking as well as synergy among different stakeholders (national government, local government, CSOs, and others).

For instance, farmers and indigenous people remain poor and marginalized because of *social inequality* and the lack of *social justice*: government policies are unfavorable to them; they are unable to access the needed services; and, many lack access to land. Thus, in almost all Asian countries, poverty has remained largely rural and agricultural, highlighting the structural nature of the problem, as well as the conflict that it breeds. A three-level response is needed: (a) concrete work on the ground to address the needs of the rural poor, (b) collaboration among stakeholders, and, (c) policy reforms.

Government also has poor appreciation of *environmental justice*. Development policies are often focused narrowly on "economic growth" and thus tend to favor investors – i.e., maximizing profit and resource extraction that often cause the displacement of local communities and destruction of the environment. Meanwhile, environmental rights defenders are persecuted. There is also the lack of *"transitional justice"*[4] to deal with massive human rights abuses in the past, such as during the Ferdinand Marcos Sr. regime and under the previous administration of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. When past abuses are allowed to fester, the underlying problems are not addressed, and there is no true peace in the absence of justice.

"There is no true peace in the absence of justice."

[4] Transitional justice is an approach to systematic or massive violations of human rights that both provides redress to victims and creates or enhances opportunities for the transformation of the political systems, conflicts, and other conditions that may have been at the root of the abuses. https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/

Addressing social inequality. Other CSOs define their mandate as *addressing social inequality*, a problem which comes in many forms – e.g., a justice system that does not treat everyone fairly, problematic election systems, and inadequate responses to poor communities when calamities do occur. This *systemic inequality* is manifested in other ways, requiring a range of CSO responses:

- *Economic inequality* where the nation's wealth is held by a few. This inequality is supported by a political oligarchy and State policies that protect the interests of investors (e.g., Indonesia's Job Creation Law and Minerals and Coals Law). Laws are often passed without public debate.
- *Unjust distribution of land and resources.* Government policies exacerbate the problem by prioritizing the interests of investors, while small farmers and indigenous peoples are evicted, or remain landless. Agricultural land is converted to other uses. In response, CSOs advocate for agrarian reform; publicize cases of land grabbing, eviction, and environmental pollution; and, speak out when atrocities are committed. CSOs also organize dialogues between stakeholders in agrarian conflicts to minimize the risks of violence.
- *Unfair international trade policies* that impact on the livelihoods of local farmers and producers. In this context, CSOs engage in political lobbying and public discussion on issues related to international trade agreements.
- *Marginalization of communities*, including those of indigenous peoples, ethnic and religious minorities, refugees and migrants, coastal fisherfolk, forest dwellers, and occupants of public land who are often treated as "people without rights."
- *Disadvantaged sectors* including persons with disabilities and women in communities. CSOs seek to empower and to enable them to participate in village-level development planning and processes.

To second-generation CSO workers (Bangladesh), the faults and errors of society are not acceptable. The society they crave for, the social change they work for is reflected in one young activist's voice: *"We dream for an inequality-disparity free society. We believe in human rights. We want balanced distribution of wealth. We strive for communal harmony. We want to build a decent society of peace, happiness, and discipline."* Many young activists also expressed their desire for a society free from the problems they currently experience and address.

"The younger generation said that they tend to favor reforms rather than revolution..."

In Bangladesh, the young CSO activists think that each of their work has somehow impacted upon the society. In terms of societal change, while the CSO elders talked about bringing on radical

change, the younger generation said that they tend to favor *reforms rather than revolution*. As explained by one worker: *"Simultaneous stability is necessary in society-economy-politics. If one sector gets unstable, the instability runs through other sectors."* This younger generation wants to move forward their warranted society with stability, through *balanced development*.

"If one sector gets unstable, the instability runs through other sectors."

Addressing discrimination. CSOs also seek to address unhealthy traditions and cultural practices, including discrimination against castes, religions, ethnic groups and tribes. They seek to empower women within their own families and communities. In India, some CSOs work to ensure that settled nomadic tribes live with dignity as well as aware of their entitlements and rights.[5]

Addressing the needs of poor sectors and communities. In Bangladesh, most of the first generation CSO workers started in the 1970s and 1980s. In identifying which social problems to address, they gave emphasis to the most severely *felt problems* as prioritized by local communities – i.e., hunger and poverty, landlessness, unemployment, illiteracy, oppression of women in the backward classes[6] of society, as well as superstition and religious fundamentalism. Ultimately, however, they considered the *capability of their organizations*, especially human resources, in determining what courses of action to take.

In all countries, CSOs identify and address problems based on the *expressed needs* of people, while implementing approaches that emphasize *self-organization* and *self-help*. CSOs strive to make poor people believe in their own potentials and help them get out of a sense of dependency. Yet the task has not been easy; poor people, especially when hit by a crisis, tend to depend on the CSOs themselves.

CSOs seek to ensure delivery of basic needs and services such as food and nutrition, education and skills development, health services, and provision of housing with sanitation and safe drinking water. Sometimes, CSOs bring attention to the needs of specific sectors, including eye care and needs of the disabled, in the case of health services.

[5] There are about 313 nomadic tribes of India; historically, many have been alienated and stereotyped by the police and media.

[6] Backward class is a collective term used by the Government of India to refer to economically-, socially-, and educationally-backward or disadvantaged individuals or communities compared to other social groups (The Kerala State Commission for Backward Classes, 2023; Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in Vikaspedia, 2020).

CSOs make people aware of their rights, entitlements, and benefits (that may include government assistance programs intended for the weaker sectors of the society). Oftentimes, government officials misuse and abuse their discretionary powers in selecting beneficiaries of public services, bypassing those who need these services most.

The role of CSOs in service delivery has long been recognized by governments. In India, CSOs' role as a service provider under government schemes has increased. Thus, government now channels funds to CSOs under various programs.[7]

In the midst of Sri Lanka's current economic crisis, CSOs address the issues faced by the most *vulnerable sectors* – i.e., persons with disabilities, the elderly, women and children, daily wage earners, and plantation workers. In the East, many Muslim women lack even the most basic garden space to be able to engage in agricultural activities; thus, CSOs help to train them in practical skills to strengthen their economic resilience in the current crisis. For the youth, CSOs offer services to address issues of drug addiction, school dropouts, and continuing education.

Building inclusiveness. In Sri Lanka, second generation workers observed that CSOs need to expand and be *inclusive* by embracing the North and the East, the plantation sector, and the youth.[8] Sri Lanka's tea plantation sector, for instance, is 33 percent controlled and managed by private companies. Here, plantation workers often do not enjoy the freedom to vote freely. The children are often forced to drop out of school when they reach grades 9 to 11 and many go to Colombo to earn a living by doing menial jobs. This has led to high incidences of teenage marriage and other social problems. However, many geographical areas in the plantation sector have yet to be reached by CSOs.

"More than just providing for people's immediate needs, CSOs seek to build people's capacities and resiliency."

Addressing different levels and types of "needs." CSOs seek to address different types of needs. They address the social conditions of poor people facing specific predicaments (e.g., addiction, homelessness, and illnesses), as well as victims of crime, unwed mothers, the elderly, migrants, street children and unwanted youth, among others. To address the need for livelihoods, CSOs build entrepreneurship among women and youth, and

[7] In India, some 143,196 CSOs are currently registered with NGO DARPAN of NITI Aayog (National Policy Commission), which is mandatory for accessing government funds.

[8] Sri Lanka's North and East have been regions of recent conflict. The plantation sector is the product of a colonial system wherein Tamil workers from Southern India were brought to work on British tea plantations, enduring harsh working and living conditions.

build market linkages for small producers. Others provide technical support to make households, cooperatives, and agricultural enterprises more productive and profitable. More than just providing for people's immediate needs, CSOs seek to build people's capacities and resiliency.

Establishing equal rights for women. Many CSOs, especially in South Asian countries, mentioned *"equal rights for women"* and *"women's empowerment"* as a continuing focus of their work and impact. In Bangladesh, the first-generation CSO activists said that they worked for the realization of basic rights of poor communities in the society, for the establishment of equal rights of women, for developing an educated-healthy-progressive nation, a society with a communal spirit, and a State based on equality and equity, among other visions for society. As one CSO worker explains, *"When we started in the 1970s and 1980s, the poverty rate was much higher, the literacy rate among men and women was much lower, and unemployment was acute. We worked to change this unbearable situation."* As noted by a woman worker who worked in the Chattogram Hill Tracts, "*At that time all the women were in a backward state, and the condition and position of the hill women was even worse. No organization was there to work for the backward hill women. We came forward and formed cooperatives with the women for themselves as well as for community empowerment — through income generating activities, adult education, health awareness and others."* Another pointed out the motivation behind their work at that time, *"We had a motto at that time that we will break this society, and we will bring forth a new society."*

In all countries, especially in South Asia, CSOs continue to work for the empowerment of women in all sectors of society, but especially among the poor in both rural and urban areas. Their work covers a wide range of interventions, e.g., active organizing, education and health, skills and livelihood trainings, public education, policy advocacy and protests, active monitoring of government programs, and support for women victims of violence. They examine, among others, cases of discrimination, women's wages and working conditions, representation in decision-making bodies, security in the workplace, and support programs for working mothers and children.

Strengthening governance and democracy through civic action. CSOs work to promote civil and political rights of people, towards strengthening democracy, transparency, and fair and equitable system of governance. CSOs work on empowering citizens who are aware of their rights, freedoms and entitlements, and who are also socially responsive to the needs of others. In Asia, most CSOs are said

to work on *people's politics (Lok Niti)* instead of *partisan politics (Raj Niti)*, as governments and party politics are seen to have failed to make real changes in people's lives.

For decades, CSOs have willingly worked in the peripheries of the State; they speak out on issues in behalf of poor and marginalized sectors in society whose voices are often unheard. CSOs contribute to democracy by defending people's rights, engaging in public awareness-building and debate, providing inputs to public policies or regulations, and joining in public protests when injustices occur. CSOs play an important role in defining the directions of development, and in ensuring that government actions remain within the corridors of democracy, and are based on human rights principles.

"CSOs have willingly worked in the peripheries of the State; they speak out on issues in behalf of poor and marginalized sectors in society whose voices are often unheard."

In Sri Lanka, CSOs say that they need to keep the spirit of the recent *people's uprising*[9] alive in demanding greater democracy and a corrupt-free government. As the credibility of the government has deteriorated, CSOs fear that the government might adopt more stringent regulatory mechanisms on CSOs. The need to increase the visibility of CSOs has become even more relevant. However, it will take a long time to make people more enlightened about democracy and make them fully aware of the value of their vote and to exercise their electoral rights in a responsible and meaningful way.

Given the role of CSOs in society, it is not surprising that the CSO sector often incurs the ire of government. *"Governments don't like us, because we are designed to ask the hard questions,"* one participant said. Noting how governments are moving once again towards authoritarianism, one participant said that CSOs are now seen as "the enemy" of the State. Some governments tend to view CSOs as "troublemakers."

"Governments don't like us, because we ask the hard questions."

Because of this, it has become difficult for CSOs to work in certain countries, especially those under authoritarian regimes. Regulations and restrictions in the

[9] Sri Lanka's public upheaval in 2022 culminated in the resignation and flight of President Rajapaksa and the installation of a new President. The protests were prompted by a chain of economic calamities, including food and fuel shortages.

operations of CSOs have become more stringent. And even in more liberal regimes, one participant observes that governments may say they support CSOs but do little action in this regard.

However, the relationship with government is not always negative. Even in hostile environments, CSOs have been able to work with government in order to improve the lives of people. CSOs continually seek to influence the policymaking process in the advancement of democratization. CSOs may even provide direction to government through their (CSO) advocacies and innovative field programs.

The interplay between CSOs and political parties is dynamic and complex. While the role of CSOs is to make political parties accountable and transparent, one participant remarked, "*political parties often need CSOs only when they are the opposition, but ignore CSOs once they get into power.*"

Some CSOs observed that because some political parties are weak or un-principled, CSOs often find themselves having to play the role of political parties. These roles include gathering, aggregating, and advocating for the needs and political demands of the basic sectors in society. Still, some CSO leaders envision CSOs wielding political power to achieve the societal transformation that they envision. However, since CSOs do not have comprehensive programs unlike political parties (most CSOs are sectoral by nature, or focus on single issues), they must scale-up by cooperating with one another through networking and alliance building. This has to be done at the local, national, and international levels.

The changing roles of CSOs in society

Why we chose CSOs as the mechanism to work for social change

The individual motivations for joining CSOs are many: idealism, a quest for social justice, and a sense of moral obligation to help the poor, sick, and less fortunate in society. While some chose CSO work as a career, some began working for CSOs by accident or became engaged in development work as students or youth volunteers, and later joined CSOs as a logical next step. Some drew inspiration from a friend or family member who had played a pioneering role in establishing CSOs and in making a change in people's lives. Others joined CSOs simply to find a job, and later adapted to the organization's mission and culture in the course of their work. Many stayed on as they found an alignment between their personal values and those held by CSOs.

"Many of the first generation CSO workers trace their roots to social activism."

In Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines, many of the first generation CSO workers trace their roots to *social activism* in the 1970s. They were students and young professionals. In Bangladesh, a good portion of the first generation CSO workers were involved in political action, intent on changing society through a socialist revolution. Many took active part in the War of Independence of 1971. However, their political struggle stumbled after the military coup of 1975[10] and the ensuing 15-year period of military rule. As their political avenues shrunk, the activists chose CSOs as their alternative platform for a "silent revolution." At that time, government jobs were not attractive, and the private sector was underdeveloped. On the other hand, CSO work appealed to a section of the educated youth who sought to find a balance between meeting their own personal needs with the task of providing assistance to society while working under the constraints of a military regime.

Many joined CSOs in order to help communities and basic sectors such as women, youth, and indigenous people. They found fulfillment from seeing disempowered groups become more aware of their rights and more capable of attaining their economic, cultural, and political goals. In Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, most think that the CSOs have made outstanding contributions especially to the economic and social empowerment of women who were historically deprived and continue to be discriminated in today's patriarchal society.

Participants said that CSOs are able to provide basic services like health, education, and livelihood. In Bangladesh, the micro-credit programs and commercial activities of CSOs have contributed immensely to business and the economy through production of goods and services, and creation of jobs and self-employment opportunities in both the formal and informal sector. In some countries, some opined that CSOs even replace government when it comes to attending to the needs of disadvantaged sectors and minority groups. Although CSOs have made noteworthy contributions in almost every sphere of social change over the last five decades, they cannot claim to have made any *exclusive* contribution in this regard.

Many saw CSOs as agents of change and a force for democratization, describing CSOs as *"voices of the communities"* and *"conscience of society."* CSOs have kept governments under pressure to formulate and reform policies to be pro-people and

[10] Founding leader of Bangladesh Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, along with his family members, was assassinated in a 1975 military coup, and his government was uprooted.

pro-poor, women-friendly, and environment-friendly. Some joined CSOs to help build bridges between underprivileged communities and big institutions such as government and business, and to make the latter more socially responsive and accountable.

In Bangladesh, most of the second-generation workers think that CSOs provide one of the best platforms to work for social change. A female participant mentioned, *"We chose to work with CSOs because we wanted to speak out for an equal, equitable and peaceful society… We cannot raise such voice as effectively from any other platform."* Although they cited the need to engage in politics, they remain aware and concerned about the limitations of *traditional* power politics, which is controlled by vested interests and rent-seeking behavior.[11] CSO workers felt that the welfare of the poor and empowerment of people cannot be left to traditional politics. Thus, alongside their involvement in politics, some started their CSOs, as they believe that CSOs can act as pressure groups with the government.

Many found it difficult to join government because of its bureaucratic culture. In contrast, CSOs allow greater freedom, flexibility, and independence to address problems in society; and, to innovate and initiate work based on the CSOs' vision of development. To many, the CSO sector provided the best "alignment" with their personal values, education and upbringing. In the Philippines, some younger CSO workers also said that government is not seen as a viable career option *right now* because of the country's current national leadership.[12]

"Working with ordinary people gives much contentment and joy when it brings changes in people's lives."

CSO workers cited *"personal fulfillment"* as the main reason why they persevered in their CSO careers. To many, being able to interact directly with poor communities, to understand their problems from their point of view, and to see poor communities achieve progress and empowerment – have been a life-changing and rewarding experience. They said that working with ordinary people gives much contentment and joy when it brings changes in people's lives. In turn, engagement with communities has also inspired CSO workers to make changes in their own personal lifestyles.

[11] *Rent-seeking* is the act of growing one's existing wealth by manipulating the social or political environment without creating new wealth. An example of rent seeking is when a company lobbies the government for grants, subsidies, investment incentives, or tariff protection.
[12] In the Philippines, the focus group discussions were conducted following the National Elections of May 2022.

When community engagement through CSOs is compatible with one's value system, you consider your engagement with the CSO as an opportunity to put into practice the philosophy of your life. Some CSO workers believed that CSOs are socially conscious and represent people from all levels of the social strata. The work environment in CSOs is generally more open and egalitarian, as they constitute communities of people who share a similar idealistic vision and engage in collective work.

Meanwhile, many of the second generation CSO workers said that they found inspiration in the passion, commitment, and sacrifice shown by the first generation leaders who had spent their whole careers in CSOs, and gave up opportunities to take on other more lucrative personal careers.

Added views from the second generation. While most entered the CSO sector with the conviction that they could make a change in society, many also believe that CSOs could enrich their own lives. In Sri Lanka, for instance, some saw the opportunity to work in a trilingual environment (Sinhala, Tamil, English). Those with trilingual competency have found in CSOs a platform to cut across language and cultural barriers.

Some joined CSOs as a career path. In Sri Lanka (and Bangladesh), some larger and well-established CSOs (Sarvodaya, PAFFREL, WDC, BRAC) have a bottom-up career path for people to excel in their respective careers while working in the organization.

Especially for the younger generation, fulfillment comes with being given greater responsibility and the opportunity to perform a wide variety of tasks. Ultimately, fulfillment comes with "being part of something greater than oneself."

However, in some countries the younger workers are questioning whether they will be able to continue working in CSOs, in view of the low compensation. Despite the fulfillment they get from working with CSOs, some said that it is hard to persevere with the relatively lower salaries in CSO-type work when one has family members to support. In the Philippines, one participant commented that perhaps *"a certain level of privilege"* was needed to make CSO work into a career. (One needs to belong to a financially better-off family, or to have an added source of income, in order to continue working in CSOs.)

In the Philippines, the second-generation workers feel that more people, especially the youth, are joining CSOs. However, CSOs must be *adaptable* to remain relevant; some CSOs have recently closed shop because of their inability to adapt to difficult situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

How has the situation changed, and how are the roles of CSOs evolving?

Shrinking of democratic space and CSO Space. There is a direct and strong correlation between the shrinking of democratic space in the country and that of space for CSOs.

In Bangladesh, the first generation CSOs noted that the country could not develop a sound democratic space from the very beginning since her independence. After about two decades of authoritarian regimes, the country got the chance to restore democracy in the 1990s but got lost on her way to democracy later on.[13] As one participant lamented, *"The democratic space could not get developed in Bangladesh due to the direct military rule in the mid-1970s and 1980s as well as the failure of 'one-day election-centric' democracy. And nowadays, even the right to vote is about to go extinct!"* When there is functional democracy, CSOs can raise their voices to uphold the rights of the marginalized sections of the society. At present, CSOs cannot express freely as the State laws and regulations constrain the voice of civil society. The National Security Agency (NSA) and other State intelligence agencies actively subdue CSO voices and hinder their activities, as the establishment considers them as "troublemakers" and in some cases as "enemies of the State."

CSOs are also pressured by the incumbent political parties when they address issues that may hamper the benefits of vested interest groups.

However, the State is not the sole force that hinders democratic and political space. CSOs cite religious extremism and fundamentalism as another hindrance to civic and democratic space.

Given the shrinking space for conventional mobilization (i.e., street rallies and demonstrations), CSOs are trying out social media to deliver their messages and to assemble like-minded CSOs. In Bangladesh, the first generation CSO workers hope that this increasing demand for new strategies will spur innovation and a more active engagement of the younger generation.

"The democratic and political space for CSOs is shrinking."

In Bangladesh, even though the democratic and political space for CSOs is shrinking, the number of CSOs and their scope of work is said to have increased. Yet CSOs often find themselves administratively cornered into difficult

[13] Bangladesh won Independence in 1971. After a brief period of parliamentary democracy, the country fell under a series of military regimes in 1975 to 1990.

situations due to restrictions imposed by the State. CSOs may fight for poor people's rights, yet CSOs themselves remain uncertain about their own organizational rights. Sometimes CSOs cannot even access or spend their allocated funds due to State-imposed regulations.

In Bangladesh, majority of the second-generation activists had spent their entire working life under a single government regime spanning about 15 years, though there were two opportunities for regime change which was disrupted by the absence of a proper voting system. This breach in the democratic process has resulted in the gradual constriction of civil society space.

The second-generation activists said that they understand the necessity of open CSO and democratic space and work for it as far as possible. They strengthen their organizations, work with communities; they raise their voices against authoritarian interventions, both online and offline; they join various alliances against human and civil rights violations; and, they utilize social media to speak out against the lack of democracy.

In Indonesia, there are growing restrictions on civil liberties. For instance, demonstrations are often responded to with repression by police and security forces, and people are criminalized.[14] Furthermore, attacks on CSOs come from government-supporter "buzzers."[15] Meanwhile, the existing political channels have not been responsive to civil society aspirations.

In Cambodia, the number of CSOs is declining due to restrictions imposed by the Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations (LANGO). There is lack of cooperation from government institutions because CSOs work on sensitive issues and can be critics of the government. For its part, government strictly monitors CSOs, especially advocacy groups and often accuse them of "incitement."

In Sri Lanka, some public officials instigate racism and fierce nationalism, espousing a belief that CSOs are a threat to national security. This attitude has seeped into the minds of public servants. In a country where social divisions emanate from ethnic and religious perceptions and biases, those in positions of power continue to create divisions among people. Sri Lanka itself has yet to fully address the challenges of peace and transitional justice in the post-war context.[16]

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[14] *Criminalization* refers to the process by which behaviors and individuals are transformed into "crimes" and "criminals." Previously, legal acts are transformed into crimes by laws and regulations, or by judicial decision.

[15] *Buzzers* refer to fake account operators that try to influence public opinion on specific topics and manipulate conversations on social media.

[16] Sri Lanka Civil War, 1983 to 2009.

CSO sector is being divided by partisan politics. In some countries, the polarizing effects of partisan politics tend to create divisions among CSOs. In the Philippines, some said that civil society is "neither homogenous nor monolithic." In the recent Philippine elections, while most CSOs supported one coalition party, there are CSOs and CSO personalities that supported the Duterte and Marcos candidacies, both hailing from political families that have questionable human rights records.

> ***"In some countries, the polarizing effects of partisan politics tend to create divisions among CSOs."***

In Cambodia, CSOs are said to be divided into two groups: (a) those that favor the government (labelled as "GONGOs") and (b) Independent CSOs. In Nepal, CSOs are divided due to their ideological and political affiliations; the situation is further muddled by the fact that some political parties establish their own CSOs.

In Bangladesh, some CSOs and CSO leaders even got involved in partisan politics – shifting from people's power politics to fundamental politics – and became the instruments of political parties. However, most CSOs chose to support the democratic process for free and fair elections and to prioritize the development agenda ever since the post-1990s democratic era. Unfortunately, democratic reforms slowed down later on. In this regard, the change and evolution of CSOs has contributed to human and social development, both positively and negatively.

CSOs and mass movements. Thus far, the collective activism and networking of CSOs has been seen mainly during natural disasters and emergencies such as the Asian tsunami, typhoons, floods, and landslides. Yet at times, CSOs in Asia have participated in national mass movements that have brought about major shifts in national governments and in the institution of democratic reforms.[17]

> ***"...at times, CSOs in Asia have participated in national mass movements that have brought about major shifts in national governments."***

Questions about CSOs' non-partisan stance. In Sri Lanka, massive protests brought down the government of former President Rajapaksha in 2022. One of the fundamental issues advocated by the thousands of youth who protested against the

[17] Among those mentioned were: the People's Power Revolution in the Philippines (1986); the Abolition of the Monarchy in Nepal (2008), where "CSOs and political parties stood together on the street;" and, the *Aragalaya* Mass Protests in Sri Lanka (2022).

former President was that Sri Lanka needs a "*system change,*" as the system that has been in place since Independence in 1948 had failed to act in the best interests of the country and its people.

Given this context in Sri Lanka, some say that CSOs need to maintain a *non-partisan stance* in order to build public dialogue and consensus on the kind of "system change" that the country needs to happen. But some Sri Lankan CSO leaders have actively engaged with party politics and have accepted positions within the government. This has raised the question as to whom the CSOs are accountable. Various forces can divide CSOs along ethnic, religious, class, and caste lines. If CSOs are to see a politically-awakened citizenry, it is important for the CSOs to unpack, define, and comprehend the meaning behind "system change."

In Nepal, second-generation CSOs workers said that no matter which political party is in power, civil society should not be divided but should keep the issues of civil society at the center. CSOs should focus on issues of governance, transparency, responsibility, and accountability of government, in order to remain trustworthy.

Continuing role of CSOs in political education. Public officials often take advantage of people's ignorance of their rights, freedoms and entitlements and this has to a great extent prevented the masses from accessing, receiving, and repeating the benefits of government services. The CSOs could fill this divide by educating the public of their rights, freedoms, and entitlements.

Continuing role of CSOs as *watchdogs*. CSOs in Asia have worked for the freedom of speech and for citizens' right to vote. The second-generation workers feel that CSOs can do more by acting as watchdogs against corruption and bad governance and by working to safeguard human rights for all, especially for those sectors of society that remain marginalized.

From rights-based to service delivery. In Bangladesh, the first-generation workers think that the role of CSOs has noticeably changed over time. The earlier CSOs devoted their entire effort to the development and empowerment of the poor-marginalized communities and the protection of people's rights, but some observe how CSOs have gradually shifted towards *service delivery* and *commercial ventures*. To them, CSO roles have evolved – from voluntary pursuits to professional activities.

The older generation activists say that evolution of CSOs in Bangladesh has affected their relevance in both ways. In some cases of service delivery and commercial activities, the CSOs have moved ahead of private and public business enterprises.

However, their growing commercial involvements have also decreased the credibility of CSOs among policymakers and citizens, with some CSOs gaining the image of a "profit-shark" business entity.

Decline of CSO innovation and change. In the Philippines, some observed that CSO development innovation and responsiveness has tapered off in the last several years. The reasons include *complacency*, the *lack of resources*, and a tendency among CSOs to cater to the *"flavor of the month"* preferences of donors. Another participant believed that there was evidence of both continuity and change in the CSO sector, depending on the prevailing social milieu. During the regime of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. for instance, most of the work of CSOs focused on advocacy on democracy and human rights.

In Bangladesh, the younger generation workers also observe that the change and evolution of the CSO role over the last one and half decade has been *slower* compared to the first three decades. But this does not mean that the role of CSOs is less. As one said, *"Human rights in the country is now downtrodden and democracy is distorted; in this difficult situation, CSOs become even more relevant than at any other time."*

In terms of the evolution of CSOs, some see a decline of innovation within the sector. According to one participant, *"CSOs keep raising the same critiques and issues – but where are the solutions?"* According to this participant, CSOs produce *very little foresight and science-based research*, and thus will continue to be ignored by decision-makers.

Reluctance of CSOs to look at the business sector as a partner. Some CSOs remain reluctant to look at the business sector as a partner, and believe that only CSOs have the moral ascendancy to talk about and pursue reforms. This perception though may be changing, as the business sector has since introduced reforms such as *corporate social responsibility (CSR)* and the *"triple bottom line"* (stipulating that companies should focus as much on social and environmental concerns as they do on profits).[18] Questions remain, though, if the emerging CSOs openness to business sector partnerships is driven simply by the lack of resources.

"Some CSOs remain reluctant to look at the business sector as a partner."

[18] In economics, the *Triple Bottom Line* theory posits that instead of one bottom line, there should be three: profit, people, and the planet.

For some NGOs, the root of the country's social ills is still the "neo-liberal" development framework manipulated by elites to amass great wealth while keeping the majority poor. One participant said that while so-called "progressives" are open to some degree of cooperation with the business sector, finding meaningful areas of compromise with the business and government sectors remains truly difficult.

Dealing with migration issues in an economic crisis. In Sri Lanka, due to the high cost of living and insecurities in the local job market, people are choosing to go abroad for employment. As a direct result of policies adopted by the government in relation to foreign employment, all the work that CSOs put in over the years in *safe migration* has been threatened, as there is a grave risk of people getting caught in human trafficking and exploitative trades.

It is important to promote CSO networking and coordination. It is unfortunate that instead of networking and coordinating with each other, CSO workings have become competitive.

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on CSO work. Efforts to contain the COVID-19 global pandemic included lockdowns and restrictions on people's mobility and gatherings. These measures, along with the disease itself, had a significant impact on CSO work and operations in the Asia region. A few CSOs progressed by continuing their work online. Environmental organizations developed apps for Android phones for people to complain and upload photos when they witnessed environmental destruction. However, some CSOs could not adapt to the situation and had to close down (Philippines).

Micro-finance CSOs lost a lot of money, as small borrowers defaulted on their loans, and immobilized CSO staff could not collect on repayments. Meanwhile, many women's groups who took microcredit loans are finding it difficult to pay back their loans. In Sri Lanka, CSOs had to engage with police and the Medical Officers of Health (MOH) in charge to reach out to the people during the pandemic.[19]

Even before the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, mobilizing people has remained a challenge in many areas.

Emerging need and capacity for CSOs to perform multiple roles. The role of CSOs is "to give voice to the disorganized and the voiceless" and "to raise awareness and advocate for change." But CSOs are continually evolving. For instance, previously, most (Philippines) CSOs were doing either "humanitarian" or "protest" activities.

[19] It should be noted that a number of CSO leaders and workers also died from the COVID-19 disease and health related complications, in 2000-2022.

However, today, many CSOs do both, indicating a capacity and need to perform multiple roles.

Rise of online communications and social media as the new platforms for public engagement. Some CSOs emphasized the need to build on "youth and communications" as the effectiveness of traditional media such as TV and print (newspapers) has decreased. *Online communications* and *social media* - an area where the youth are both highly engaged in and highly knowledgeable about – have become the new arena for public information and discourse.

"...social media has become the new arena for public discourse."

There is a continuing "war" for public opinion in *digital space*. For example, the incessant marketing of certain business activities and products gives them the appearance of being "sustainable" and environment-friendly, but in fact, the companies damage the environment and violate human rights.[20] In such cases, CSOs should continue to educate the public about human rights violations committed against local communities, and the attempts of companies at "green-washing."[21]

Internal Challenges and Responses of CSOs

In your view, what are the key internal issues that affect the relevance and viability of CSOs?

The CSO sector needs to redefine its relationships with government, private sector, communities, its donors and other stakeholders. CSOs face an "existential crisis" – on one hand, there is high demand for CSO assistance to the poor and disempowered, but on the other hand, CSOs are constrained by various factors.

"The lack of funding is the leading internal issue that CSOs need to address."

Both generations identified some major *internal issues* that affect the relevance and sustainability of the CSOs. These include: reduced funding for CSOs and projects, dealing internally with the shrinking of CSO space, directions for the next generation of CSO workers, and the

[20] For example, a mining company claims that its operation complies with decent work standards and does not harm the environment, when in fact it is not true.

[21] Green-washing is a marketing strategy adopted by companies or organizations to create a public image of being ecologically responsible. This can include use of terminology such as "eco-friendly" or "sustainable," which are vague and not verifiable.

need to adopt to new (digital information) technology. Almost all of the participants mentioned *"tight" or "no" funding* as the leading internal issue that CSOs need to address, in order for CSOs to sustain their operations and to remain relevant.

The lack of funding from external and internal sources remains a key challenge especially for rights-based organizations. The sustainability of the CSOs is also negatively impacted by the shortage of committed, volunteer-minded, and efficient activists. In other cases, there are internal clashes, quarrels over positions in the organizational hierarchy especially in the case of larger CSOs.

Declines in donor funding

Overall funding for CSOs has been in decline over the last several years. All seven Asian countries involved in the discussions[22] have been reclassified as "middle income;" meanwhile the donors are gradually shifting their assistance elsewhere (to "low-income" countries, such those in Africa). Also, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many donors have shifted their assistance to new development priorities, or else have redirected their funds to address *domestic* problems.

In Asia, some of the earlier donors already left and the funding portfolios of the remaining donors are being squeezed. The freedom of CSOs gets compromised when they rely on donors for funding or for financing their projects. Although the grassroots CSOs know the ground reality much better than the donors, they often have no choice but to comply with the directions of donor offices in the countries' capitals where knowledge and appreciation of local realities may be lacking or superficial. One CSO worker lamented that funding has gone to consultants and sub-contracted individuals who may not understand the issue/situation well but are able to produce glossy reports.

Shifts in donor focus and requirements. Given the decline in donor funding, there has been *tightening of donor requirements* and a shift towards more *donor-defined interventions and projects*. The requirements of funders have become more rigid, and oftentimes the planned projects of a CSO may not fit the program priorities of the donor.

In Cambodia, CSOs noted that some donors provide funds but do *not* support administrative costs. They also require counterpart contributions from the relevant stakeholders, including from local governments (authorities) and communities. The procedures for expending money and reporting are very complicated. Meanwhile, most donors only look into compliance, and only accept project results.

[22] Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines and Sri Lanka.

Sometimes there is a mismatch between donor priorities and CSO priorities (objectives), and CSOs forego their goals to fulfill donor requirements. This is all about the bargaining power of CSOs; if donors are flexible, CSO may be given space to address their identified issues.

In the Philippines, one participant commented that funding was not a major problem for his organization since the issue they focused on ("environment") has remained popular with donors. The greater problem was the *short-term nature of projects*, which made it more difficult to achieve impact.

The short-term nature of projects also affects the working philosophy of CSOs and their approach to development work. In the Philippines, on-ground *community organizing* work needs to be sustained long-term in order to yield benefits, but CSOs can only provide short-term investments. In Sri Lanka, CSOs noted the need for *groundwork* to prepare the community and the work environment.

Often, there are disconnects between donor-driven projects and ground realities. Donor funding portfolios in most occasions are directed by fashionable global agendas, yet the on-ground need may be something else.

The importance of CSO compliance with *good governance standards* was also raised. In the Philippines, some donors require PCNC[23] certification (which is stringent) and reporting requirements to government as well as other stakeholders. Meanwhile, over-dependence on donor funding may also cause CSOs to lose their independence and identity, as donors try to exercise control over the CSOs' activities and development interventions. Sometimes, donors may even try to control the organization itself. In Bangladesh, one indigenous female activist mentioned an incident where a donor agreed to fund a project of her organization on condition that a portion of her CSO's Board of Directors include members from the donor agency. Their existing board had been comprised entirely of indigenous peoples' representatives.

Lack of funding for human rights work. Due to the tightening of CSO space, many donors try to play it "safe" and refuse to fund what they see as "politically-sensitive" work. This is because, in many Asian countries, CSO access to foreign funds is strictly regulated by the government; all foreign funds and assisted projects need prior screening and approval by the relevant government agencies.

"In many Asian countries, CSO access to foreign funds is strictly regulated by the government."

[23] Philippine Council of NGO Certification

Thus, in Cambodia, most donors require that supported CSOs must be "neutral, non-political and must help the poor and vulnerable people." This restriction causes a lack of donors (and partners) for human rights organizations and reduces the capacity of the CSO sector to intervene in cases of human rights abuse.

In Sri Lanka, CSOs are currently handing some 150 court cases on behalf of persons who have been arrested and detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Similarly, environmental rights organizations have filed 33 cases before the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court challenging executive actions that have caused damage to the natural environment. However, these CSOs are facing financial constraints as litigations on human rights issues have not attracted donor funding.

In Sri Lanka, CSOs in the human rights field said that some donors are asking them not to challenge local State authorities, not to confront them and not to report against them. This has created difficulties for human rights organizations.

Funding and CSO staff issues. In the Philippines, one CSO worker lamented that even if a CSO would want to provide higher salaries, it is not possible due to budget constraints. The lack of funding has become an "unspoken issue," and is reflected mostly in the inability of CSOs to provide adequate salaries.

In Cambodia, some CSO staff work without salary and without a budget for their activities. There are times when CSO personnel stop working and then migrate for jobs in the city or outside the country. Some say that the lack of youth participation in CSOs is also because the CSOs lack the funds for internal operations.

In Indonesia, CSOs cited several options for managing the lack of funding for personnel, i.e., (a) adjusting the number of hired staff according to financial capabilities; (b) recruiting personnel on *project-basis*; and, (c) conducting staff *apprenticeship* programs.

"CSOs must work towards finding new pathways to ensure (financial) sustainability."

Competition for funds. Among CSOs, there is competition for donor funding. Some feel that financial sustainability could be a possibility for smaller organizations rather than larger organizations considering the costs involved. However, the CSOs must work towards finding new pathways to ensure sustainability.

Financial sustainability. Given the decline in donor funding, CSOs have to work on self-developed, community-prioritized projects where they do not need to rely on the

external finances. Also, a growing number of CSOs have embarked on micro-credit programs and income generation activities (IGAs) for their financial sustainability.

Some CSOs have resorted to social enterprises or some sort of income generation activities of their own – running a hospital, running a school, some production work, etc., to support their organizational activities.

However, the shift has not been easy. Microcredit programs and business initiatives require fulltime attention, raising questions as to whether those who spend most of their time in commercial activities can still be termed as civil society organizations. Other CSOs have begun to look into the potentials and limitations of crowd funding. Also, Indonesian activists noted that CSOs lack the organizational capacity to collect from non-grant funding sources which include social enterprises, fundraising, and accessing funds from corporations (CSR) and philanthropic institutions. They noted that many CSO have no funding strategy that look *beyond grants*.

In Indonesia, CSOs are exploring the possibility of setting up funding mechanisms from the government's national and regional State budgets for specific types of development intervention. This would also strengthen opportunities for CSO-government collaboration.

In the Philippines, a participant observed that despite the development of various CSO-managed funding mechanisms in the country,[24] the majority of CSOs still rely on foreign grants.

Shrinking political space for CSOs[25]

Bureaucratic requirements imposed by the government serve to suppress CSO activism especially in the field of human rights. In Sri Lanka as with other countries, CSOs seeking to work in the Northern and Eastern regions (or politically-sensitive regions) face tedious and cumbersome screening processes before they are able to obtain government approval for their interventions. CSOs have thus become reluctant to address human rights issues. In order to overcome this hurdle, some CSOs have forged innovative strategies that combine *rights-based* interventions with *needs-based* interventions, striking a balance when formulating strategies and interventions.

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[24] In the Philippines, several NGO-managed small-grants mechanisms were established through endowments; some were raised through debt-swaps. These include the Foundation for the Philippine Environment (FPE), the Foundation for a Sustainable Society (FSSI), the Forest Foundation Philippines (FFP), and the Peace and Equity Foundation (PEF).

[25] Refer also to ANGOC (Ed). (2022). *Shrinking CSO Space: The legal and political environment for CSOs in seven Asian countries*. See cite link here, https://angoc.org/portal/shrinking-civic-space-the-legal-and-political-environment-for-csos-in-seven-asian-countries/

Local operational issues. CSOs face practical difficulties in the field. In Cambodia, CSOs need a permission letter from the local authority before they implement their activities. They have to contend with local authorities, who may be arrogant, as their prevailing mindset is to monitor the activities of CSO staff. Sometimes, local authorities cancel their consent to participate in NGO programs because they think that their work is more important than CSO work. Others participate in NGO activities only if they are given allowances. Many Cambodian CSOs find it increasingly difficult to recruit village volunteers.

Safety and security of CSO staff. Many CSO staff have become concerned for their own safety and security. In Indonesia, second-generation activists say that they had become victims of the State's physical and verbal abuse. In the Philippines, the State has resorted to "red-tagging,"[26] harassment, and vilification of some CSOs, which has become more prevalent in recent years as democracy in the country has eroded. This has made it even more difficult for CSOs to become sustainable.

In Cambodia and Sri Lanka, human rights organizations have become victims of human rights violations themselves; many are experiencing restrictions. State oppression drives fear into the minds of activists especially those working for ethnic and religious minorities. There is no mechanism to air grievances. In Sri Lanka, those persons who were detained after "*Aragalaya*" are living under dire conditions inside prisons.[27]

Building a CSO successor generation

Views from the first-generation workers. In all countries, most of the first generation CSO workers think that the next generation of CSO workers share their commitment for work. However, some differ in their opinion, *"We worked for the organization day and night in very low wages, while at present they take higher salaries and do not want to work beyond their stipulated time."* Some say that the second generation is not prepared to make the same sacrifice made by the first generation as they are more inclined toward a job with fixed working schedules and are hesitant to work beyond office hours and on weekends when required.

"Building a 'successor generation' of CSO leaders is a (major) concern for the sector."

[26] "Red-tagging" in the Philippines refers to the blacklisting of individuals or organizations that are critical of the government in power. The individuals and organizations are "tagged" as either "communist" or "terrorist."

[27] *Aragalaya* (Sinhala for "struggle") refers to mass protests in Sri Lanka that began in March 2022 against the government which had been criticized for mismanaging the economy, which led to subsequent economic crisis.

The group believes that the building a "successor generation" of CSO leaders is a concern for the sector. In Indonesia (and the Philippines), many first-generation workers were student activists before working with CSOs. However, today's youth did not go through a period of activism, and thus may not have the same level of sensitivity to social issues.

Another commented that the changing value system among the youth has posed a challenge to CSOs. The youth adopt a more consumer-oriented lifestyle and seek "quick money" without as much concern for the value system. This can be seen in the high turn-over of younger generation CSO workers who are relatively quick to change places of work.

However, one worker noted that CSO salaries are low and that salaries in government are actually higher; thus, many young people prefer to join government. There are also CSOs that do not give enough opportunities to their second-generation staff to take the lead.

In the Philippines, it was also explained that the lack of new CSO leaders is partly due to the lack training programs for them. During the 1990s and early 2000s, there were many training programs for young CSO staff and middle managers, but donors have since ceased to support these programs. Today's CSO managers and second-liners would benefit greatly from basic orientations on development work, socio-political analysis, development management, etc.

There are other factors that determine if a young staff will stay on with an NGO, such as how well the organization is managed and clarity of the organization's goals. In this regard, good board members are helpful and *role models* are important. The older generation believes that young CSO staff will stay on if they encounter good leadership examples in their organizations.

Views from the second-generation workers. Many second-generation CSO workers say that they are as committed as the older generation. This commitment has been well reflected by their actions, i.e., in their response to people and communities afflicted by crises such as floods and natural disasters. However, a few thought that the first-generation workers were more committed, as they had to undergo grave shocks such as the War of Independence (1971) and famine (1974) in Bangladesh, and repression under authoritarian governments and military rule in Indonesia and the Philippines.

In Sri Lanka, second generation workers observe a stark difference between themselves and the first generation of CSO leaders and workers. There are differences in ideology, value systems, cultures, and understanding of socio-economic and political realities. The second generation feels that although they lack experience compared with the first generation, it is up to the older generation to educate and mentor the youth on the issues and causes that they are passionate about.

Hindrances. In India, workers mentioned that many CSO founders and "old guards" refuse to retire; they hold on to their position by throwing around their weight and influence. In the process, the organization becomes highly personalized. And in the absence of second liners, the organization suffers after the departure of such leaders.

Another problem is the difficulty in getting committed workers. CSO salaries and employment benefits are competitively lower than the pay packages offered by government and the private sector, thus making it difficult for CSOs to attract and retain young and qualified workers.

Engaging the youth on their terms. In building a successor generation, it is important to engage the youth *on their terms*. The younger generation today is *ambitious*, *entrepreneurial,* and *independent*; they also prefer more flexible ways of working. Thus, there is a need to be more resourceful in reaching out to them. Promoting the use of *social media* in CSO work may provide a means for engaging today's youth. This could include the use of social media for advocacy, and introduction of *e-marketing* for community-produced goods.

CSOs need to motivate and inspire the youth generation to bring fresh innovative ideas and vibrancy to the organization. At the same time, seniors should "update themselves" as many seem hesitant to adapt to the changing social landscape.

In the Philippines, the first-generation group mentioned that they were aware that the youth of today are different. Yet, *"we should not mold them to be us,"* one participant cautioned. "*They may stay in the CSO sector for only a few years, but they may continue to do good in government, social enterprises, etc. Also, it may not be accurate to say that the youth do not have "passion" – they just have their own way of expression."* Another participant chimed in, saying that young CSO staff should be given space to work in their own way, as long as the

"It may not be accurate to say that the youth do not have 'passion' – they just have their own way of expression."

organizational principles and the results monitoring system are clear. Mentoring is important as well.

Training for a next generation. Many CSO workers first got involved in CSOs through emergency relief, rehabilitation, and developmental activities; they later had to move on to other roles as community organizers, facilitators, and advocates. CSO workers said they had to learn the ropes through direct field experience – either on their own, or through mentorship by their elders. However, much of this practical field knowledge (e.g., community organizing skills) is being lost – given the ageing of a CSO generation; the lack of proper "tooling" through documentation, curriculum-building and skills sharing; and, the decline of in-house training programs within and among CSOs.

"Much of this practical field knowledge (e.g., community organizing skills) is being lost – given the ageing of a CSO generation."

Indeed, very few CSOs conduct *in-house* capacity building programs for their *own workers* in the organization. Moreover, in most countries, the CSO sector itself has no programs for building the next generation of CSO leaders.

With regards to the interaction between older and younger generations within CSOs, there were views illustrating opposite ends of the spectrum. On one hand, one Filipino participant said it was difficult for younger staff to assert themselves because of the "seniority issue" — i.e. the more senior members exercising greater decision-making authority. On the other hand, in some CSOs, the leaders were getting less involved in management, leaving the youth to make decisions on their own, without guidance.

To build a *successor generation* of CSO leaders and workers, it is important that CSOs create healthy democratic spaces within the organization to enable workers to express their ideas without fear and intimidation. The young workers should participate in all aspects of the decision-making process of the organization.

Indonesia: Views of younger generation CSO activists

- Working in NGOs gives one the freedom to innovate. It is different from working as a civil servant in a bureaucratic setting or as a private sector employee.
- If given the opportunity to lead an NGO, the younger generation will consider hiring workers that include the older and younger generations, as it is important for the younger generation of NGO activists to learn from the older generation. Meanwhile, the young NGO leaders will ensure that the younger generation continues to innovate.
- Work allowances are required. Even though NGOs are a non-profit sector, allowances are still needed to meet the needs of daily life.
- The income earned from working in NGOs is relatively low but sufficient. The younger generation of NGO activists is committed to continuing their activities in NGOs, at least for the next five years.
- The younger generation of NGO activists are concerned about their personal and family safety, including the security of personal data. They have experienced acts of violence and intimidation, both verbal and visual, in relation to their work.

Keeping up with digital technology

Technology was a challenge to the older generation and it still remains! In the decade of 1990s, as information technology started to expand, most of the then senior CSO workers were not technology-capable. Later on, they learned computer technology out of necessity. A "digital divide" remains between the older and younger generation CSO workers. The mentality of the older generation (of not being technology-friendly) remains as a major constraint.

"A 'digital divide' remains between the older and younger generation CSO workers."

Interestingly, the second generation CSO workers consider digital technology to be a continuing challenge. Many organizational members are not technology-oriented and lack the needed skills.

The use of information technology tools to support CSO research and advocacy work is still not optimized. For example, there is still very little use of data processing software.

Sustaining the interest of CSO workers

Sources of disappointment and despair in CSO work. In Bangladesh, some CSO workers pointed out the *"lack of recognition"* as a source of disappointment. Others mentioned that although they got social and organizational recognition, they could not achieve what they had hoped for when they started. In Bangladesh, one source of frustration has been the government's *NGO Affairs Bureau*, which was established to facilitate the work of NGOs. However, this government agency continues to harass CSOs. There was a time when the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) acted as the CSO guardian organization, but ADAB has since been dismantled. Many pioneers of the CSO sector have passed, and no one takes care of the CSO sector in a united way; each CSO now has to fend for itself.

In Bangladesh, second generation CSO workers cited their sources of disappointment as: (a) low salaries, (b) overall limited funding for CSO work, (c) lack of office equipment and poor office infrastructure, (d) non-worker friendly environment in offices and work-spaces, (e) limited application and use of digital technology, and (f) lack of attention given to establishing women- and children-friendly environments.

In Sri Lanka, CSOs illustrated the types of situations that bring despair in their work:

- when donors try to ensure the sustainability of their own (donor) organizations without considering the sustainability of the organizations that they fund;
- when CSO leaders accept high positions in government after a change in the political scene, because they have destroyed the public goodwill that people placed on them;
- when people elect the same people, political families and political parties that have destroyed the country in the past through their authoritarian rule, corruption, political patronage, and economic mismanagement;
- when International NGOs and UN agencies attend meetings with top government officials, and the visibility of small organizations get sidelined;
- When people expect dole-outs, become dependent on aid, and expect the CSOs to deliver even more tangible goods and services and not empowerment programs; and,
- when State authorities impose restrictions on CSOs, and the work that CSOs did in the past under great risk fades away.

In Cambodia, a source of disappointment is the fact that the younger generation is not as much interested in CSO work. They prefer to have regular, secure and better-paying jobs in factories, companies, and micro-finance institutions. They also prefer to join as staff of the government.

In Cambodia, CSOs do not have funds for operations and they have to work under severe restrictions of the government. Yet, CSO workers continue to hope that, through working with CSOs, they will be able to receive adequate salaries, contribute to society's development, help the poor and vulnerable people, get experience, and eventually receive their pensions.

In the Philippines, most CSO workers felt demoralized after seeing the results of the 2022 National Elections where the son of a deposed dictator was elected into power. To some, this seemed like a "slap on the face" of CSOs. Many felt that the past work of CSOs on political education and advocacy over the past 30-plus years, had gone to waste. Either the CSO interventions were ineffective and peripheral, or the sector was simply unable to deal with the massive disinformation campaign waged by the Marcos political machinery. There was also a tendency to play the "blame game." The youth also needed time to process what happened. But after a while, morale bounced back, though there were some people who ceased being active in their groups. There is need for more reflection on the election results, but this reflection must lead to action.

Areas of fulfilment and hope in CSO work. In Bangladesh, CSO workers noted that the CSO sector continues to expand despite all the problems, which shows signs of hope. The new generation works in diversified issues and contributes to the development of social-economic-State policies, which also makes the first generation hopeful about the future of this sector.

In Bangladesh, the second generation CSO activists said that they are able to engage in a diversity of activities, and to innovate approaches. They get awards, medals, trophies, certificates, and invitations to conferences abroad, in recognition of their work. A section of the donor community now feels more comfortable to work with the younger generation than with the older generation.

In the Philippines, the younger CSO workers mentioned that working for CSOs provides very good training on different areas, such as research, advocacy, organizational management, and resource mobilization. Because of the lack of funds and staff, CSO workers must learn how to do a variety of tasks, unlike in corporations where staff are put in specialized units or departments doing only one

specific task. Thus, they emphasized the need for a formal leadership and capacity development program for CSO second-liners.

In Sri Lanka, CSO workers said that they find hope when political prisoners and victims of human rights violations get released from custody, and victims come with their families to express their gratitude to the CSOs. This gives them fresh courage to sustain their work.

In Cambodia, a human rights worker said that he found hope in receiving an appreciation letter from the prison department. Other CSOs mentioned receiving appreciation letters from their donor and from the local government.

In Bangladesh, the first-generation CSO leaders said that they want to continue work with interest in their organizations until their last day. They do not need any extra incentive from their organizations.

Women workers. In Bangladesh, some stated that women workers of CSOs still face challenges, not necessarily within their workplaces, but more so in dealing with external institutions and communities. Thus, with few exceptions, women in CSOs tend to keep a low profile in a society that remains patriarchal and where women (including CSO workers) still face gender discrimination.

"Women workers of CSOs still face challenges... in a society that remains patriarchal."

In Cambodia, CSO workers noted that only few women apply for jobs with CSOs. Although the social status of women has improved, society remains patriarchal. Some old practices persist, like daughters are not sent to school or allowed to work far away from home. Men lack confidence in the professional abilities of women, and women lack confidence in themselves.

There is need to ensure representation of women in all levels of the organization. Women from underprivileged segments of society must be allowed to make their voices heard within the organization; CSOs must not create an environment where women feel that they have to pull back and keep silent on their opinions and voice.

Scope for creativity. In Bangladesh, the second generation CSO workers said that they do things differently and with more creativity and spontaneity than their previous generation. In raising funds, they take creative steps like *crowd funding* through social media; they innovate in human resource management and in meeting project goals and objectives.

Resistance may come from the older generation. One worker recounted an experience wherein he was emphasizing the importance of social media in advocacy work, but the reply from older staff was that "this (traditional media) is what we have been doing for the longest time."

How would the younger generation manage the CSO differently? Some second-generation Sri Lankan leaders who now hold the top executive position in their organization said they would not wait that long to hand over their leadership role to the third generation. In the Philippines, one worker mentioned the need to give more consideration for the effort and time being devoted by staff workers "on the ground." Another said that CSO leaders should be showing deeper concern for staff, beyond the usual "how are you?" which for some bosses is just a prelude to inquiring about the progress made in one's work.

"Young CSO workers said that merely providing social services at the cost of self-sacrifice is not enough… development work (today) requires a greater degree of professionalism."

In India, young CSO workers said that merely providing social services at the cost of self-sacrifice is not enough. Today, development work requires a greater degree of *professionalism* – for planning programs and interventions, management, execution, documentation, and reporting. In India and elsewhere, CSOs also need to comply and cope with the increasing regulatory requirements of government agencies.

Feedback on the FGD activity

Many felt that the FGDs provided an opportunity for CSO workers to examine matters that they never discussed collectively before. Usually, CSOs do not get the time to reflect on their own work, but this process has certainly helped CSO workers to reflect on their own journey, understand their present, and forge a view for the future.

For many, the FGD activity itself was enjoyable, relevant, and informative. CSO workers, especially from the second generation, said that rarely do they get the chance to take part in this type of open, participatory discussion. They said that this exercise enabled them to understand and appreciate the similarities and differences of their own thinking with those of the older generation.

Some said that the reflection process has proven quite revealing as it helped the CSO workers to evaluate their own performance and to acknowledge the diversity in

their decision-making processes. Self-reflection and self-evaluation are crucial for personal growth.

Some feedback and suggestions on the improving the FGD process:

- CSOs should continue this kind of self-reflection within their own organizations and assisted communities. This will strengthen the CSO sector itself and their public campaigns.
- Expand the reflection process to include a diversity of CSOs (beyond one's immediate circles) and allow more time for discussion.
- Include donors and assisted communities in the reflection process.
- Use the FGD reports (from this activity) as a source of continuing reflection and learning among NGO social activists.
- The second generation CSO workers suggested to have joint discussions with the first generation of activists. A joint discussion between the first and second generations of CSO workers would be enlightening and would enable the two generations to learn from each other's perspectives.
- Finally, CSOs should initiate conversations with the youth, the "Gen Z" or a potential "third generation" of development workers and leaders.[28]

[28] "Gen Z" or Generation Z are colloquially known as *zoomers*. Researchers and popular media use the mid-to-late 1990s as starting birth years and the early 2010s as ending birth years.

POSTSCRIPT: Similarities and differences between first and second generations of CSO workers

The in-country facilitators and documenters were asked: From the discussions, what were the observed similarities and differences between the first and second generation of CSO workers?

Md. Rizwanul Islam, ALRD/Bangladesh:

Similarities. The two generations addressed similar social problems faced by their targeted communities; both chose the CSO sector as their vehicle for social change. They state that CSOs have made noteworthy contributions in almost every sphere of the country's social and economic development during the last five decades, even though the CSO sector cannot claim having made any *exclusive* contribution in this respect. Both generations think that CSO space has shrunk due to the absence of democracy in politics and society. The freedom of CSOs also gets compromised when they rely too much on donors for funding, which gives the donors the space to exercise control over CSO activities and even over their organizations. Activists from both the generations emphasize the need for financial sustainability and suggest that CSOs take on microcredit programs or other commercial endeavors. Most activists express trust on the commitment of the younger generation of CSO activists. Both generations see digital technology to be a challenge. Both groups remain hopeful about the future of CSOs in the country.

Differences. The first-generation activists mostly worked for alleviation of poverty, literacy, and empowerment of women, while the second generation worked towards removing social inequality and protecting human rights. The first generation took on the CSO sector to pursue a *"silent revolution,"* while the second generation thinks that CSOs provide a good platform for *social reforms*, or for *gradual* social change. The first-generation activists are a bit critical of the growing commercial and political roles of the CSO. The second-generation activists opine that they act, at least reactively, to combat the trend of shrinking space of CSOs.

Almost all first-generation participants mentioned "tight" or "no" funding as the leading internal issue for CSO operations and sustainability. While the second-generation activists agree that CSO funding is a problem, they think that the shortage of committed, volunteer-minded and efficient activists, internal clashes, and quarrels over positions in the organizational hierarchy also expose the CSOs to added challenges. There was a debate among the second-generation participants on whether the organizations that run microcredit programs and commercial activities

can still be termed as "civil society organizations." A few first-generation activists have also been critical of the second generation for their being "commercial."

Despair or hopelessness seem to be grave among the first-generation activists. They mention the lack of recognition, dismantling of unity, and individualism as areas of despair; while the second-generation activists note the lack of improved technology, funding crisis, deficit in worker-friendly environments, infrastructural shortage, and lack of women- and children-friendly environments.

Nhek Sarin, STAR Kampuchea/Cambodia:

The two generations of CSO workers share somewhat similar views on the important role of civil society organizations. They think that CSOs promote better service delivery and reduce poverty through agricultural programs. CSOs also provide people the opportunity to participate in policy change in the government and in the private sectors. In this way, CSOs contribute to the passage of laws and the promotion of law enforcement.

Both generations think that the younger generation is generally not interested in working with CSOs because salaries are low. Instead, the youth prefer to find employment in private companies and factories, microfinance institutions or the government. Others choose to seek work in neighboring countries.

Many feel that the youth generally lack opportunities to compete in the country's labor market. Skills and capacities remain low; and rural and urban youth who lack the needed training are discriminated against. Also, traditional and cultural discrimination against daughters still exist; girls are sometimes not sent to school nor allowed to seek work far away from their homes.

While learning digital technology is not a problem for the youth, they need training on its use and specific applications to benefit the society. Moreover, the youth need capacity building, especially on management and leadership.

AVARD/India

Similarities. Both generations work for the welfare of the people belonging to weaker sections and marginalized communities in society. Both believe in the established formal structure of the organization in conformity with the law of the land to seek official financial support for the development of the targeted groups such as scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, disabled, etc. Both generations feel that they have good rapport with local communities.

Differences. The first generation appears to be more individual- and leader-centered, whereas the second generation believes more in collective leadership. The first generation emphasizes the stability of the organization by ensuring some sort of corpus fund or income-generating activities whereas the second generation gives more emphasis to programs and people's participation. The first generation seems hesitant in introducing digital technology and innovation whereas the second generation is more open to the new technology. The first generation believes more in a top-down approach to internal administration whereas the second generation believes in bottom-up processes which may provide a more congenial atmosphere for workers with freedom to innovate and experiment.

Arjun Bhattarai and Kiran Shrestha, NFN/Nepal

There were several similarities and few differences in terms of the thinking and perspectives between the two generations. Majority of the participants from both generations are leaders or representatives of their organizations and thus share similar experiences.

Both generations talk about the shrinking space/position/role of CSOs in the country. They share a common assessment of the unfavorable conditions and legal barriers that CSOs face in Nepal. These include the legal hassles that CSO encounter during their operations, the requirement for CSOs to register for a permanent account number (PAN) from the Inland Revenue Department, and CSOs being subjected to VAT and taxes (despite their status as registered "non-profit organizations"). Also, many government bodies seem to control CSO operations unnecessarily, in the name of regulation and monitoring.

In terms of differences, the second-generation workers have come to realize that many first generation CSO leaders are not willing to hand over leadership/authority to the second generation in the sector. Meanwhile, the younger generation CSO workers do not seem to be as motivated in doing volunteerism and social work.

The generations also differ in their methods of work and use of technology for advocacy and campaigning. Similarly, the motivation towards social work also differs between both generations. The first generation focuses on *broad issues*; the second generation focuses on *specific cases* as well as self-promotion.

Due to the lack of leadership handover from one generation to the next, the sector is also shrinking. Opportunities are limited for the youth in the CSO sector due to unfair governance practices (nepotism, leadership held by the older generation, and cases of corruption). Such reasons also destroy the sense of "we feeling" among the youth.

There are also some differences about the sense of security. The first generation has no way to shift careers as they have already invested their time and energy into CSO work; some even express frustration over the treatment they receive from bureaucrats and authorities. On the other hand, the second-generation workers have other career and job options; many say that they are uncertain on whether they will remain affiliated with the CSO sector over the next decade.

Jose Ignatius Pagsanghan/Philippines

When comparing the responses of the first and second generations of CSO workers, the similarities are more apparent, while the differences are fewer and more subtle.

Similarities. With regards to the societal problems the NGOs of the FGD participants were trying to address, answers clustered around the ideas of correcting injustices, promoting empowerment, and providing the poor with access to resources. In the FGDs of both generations, there was some mention of the societal problem being "structural." In terms or personal reasons for choosing the CSO/NGO sector, some did so by accident, while others cultivated a more deliberate career path. This was true for both generations. The key issues facing the CSO sector – funding, second generation, technology, etc. – were also explored by both generations.

Differences. The first-generation conversation, however, revealed hints of a long-standing ideological divide within the sector. One participant lamented that some CSOs remain reluctant to look at the business sector as a partner, and believe that only CSOs have the moral ascendancy to talk about and pursue reforms. Another participant, however, asserted that the root of the country's social ills is still the "neo-liberal" development framework manipulated by elites, and finding meaningful areas of compromise with the business and government sectors remains truly difficult.

Also, two participants in the first generation raised the point that innovation and responsiveness of the CSO sector has tapered off in the last several years, while the second-generation participants were generally more optimistic about the sector.

Lastly, there was more discussion about CSO capacity-building and leadership development in the first generation FGD. This is perhaps expected, since the older generation is more concerned about ensuring future CSO capacity, while the younger generation is more engaged with the present.

Charika Marasinghe/Sri Lanka

The two generations of CSO workers show stark differences in their approaches, due to the different societal contexts to which they were exposed and the social

consciousness they acquired. For example, in the context of a not-so supportive environment for CSOs, the first generation utilizes *"smart strategies"* that combine a rights-based approach with a needs-based approach in order to minimize negative responses and interference from State authorities. In contrast, the second generation tends to be more *reactive* in their strategies and responses when dealing with resistance by State authorities towards CSO work. Many of the second-generation workers lack a broad understanding and outlook of the social, economic, political, and cultural contexts in which they operate.

In spite these differences, both generations identified more or less the same issues that CSOs need to address at the present time. However, the second generation emphasized the need to prepare the youth for successor leadership. The second-generation CSO leaders who managed to climb to the top of their organizations said that they are committed to enabling the *third generation* to climb the ladder faster than their own.

Most of the first-generation workers began their journey in CSOs with a strong desire to serve the community. Encountering many challenges, their passion and commitment helped them to navigate and nurture the CSOs through turbulent times. The first generation's devotion to CSO work has been guided by a value system that has given them the moral authority to take a stance against injustices.

Unlike the first generation, majority in the second generation initially joined the CSO community for employment and later developed the interest, passion, and commitment to the cause of serving communities. The second generation appears to have set their own professional goals in life and whether they would sustain a long-term interest in CSOs is uncertain. The second generation also expects a more professionalized approach to the internal governance of CSOs. ■

Founded in 1979, the Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC) is a regional association of national and regional networks of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Asia actively engaged in promoting food sovereignty, land rights and agrarian reform, sustainable agriculture, participatory governance, and rural development. ANGOC member networks and partners work in 10 Asian countries together with some 3,000 CSOs and community-based organizations (CBOs). ANGOC actively engages in joint field programs and policy discussions with national governments, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and international financial institutions (IFIs).

The complexity of Asian realities and diversity of CSOs highlight the need for a development leadership to service the poor of Asia – providing a forum for articulation of their needs and aspirations as well as expression of Asian values and perspectives. Thus, the ANGOC network promotes land and resource rights, smallholder agriculture, and human rights and civic participation, by serving as a platform for Asian CSOs to generate knowledge, share tools, and conduct constructive policy dialogues.

ANGOC is a member of the Global Land Tool Network (GLTN), Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR), Indigenous Peoples' and Community Conserved Areas and Territories (ICCA) Consortium, International Land Coalition (ILC), and Fair Finance Asia (FFA).

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The **Initiatives for Dialogue and Empowerment through Alternative Legal Services (IDEALS), Inc.** is a non-stock, non-profit legal focused advocacy and service institution organized to address the legal and technical needs of the marginalized, disempowered, and vulnerable groups, particularly the agrarian reform beneficiaries, farmer-traders, migrant sectors, persons and communities affected by disasters, and victims of human rights violations. IDEALS is dedicated to develop and facilitate partners' initiatives for empowerment and sustainability as well as assisting disadvantaged and marginalized sectors in gaining improved access to justice and equity.

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This paper summarizes a series of conversations on the key challenges faced by civil society organizations (CSOs) involving two generations of CSO workers in seven Asian countries. These 15 conversations involved 178 CSO workers from Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines, and Sri Lanka.

The discussions cover four topics:

- *Societal issues addressed by CSOs*: What changes in society do you hope to achieve?
- *Evolution of CSOs as mechanism for social change*: How has the role of CSOs in society changed?
- *Internal challenges facing CSOs*: What are the key internal issues that affect the relevance and viability of CSOs?
- *The next generation of CSO workers*: What are the challenges in building the next generation of CSO workers?

ANGOC

ALRD Association for Land Reform and Development

AVARD Quest for Freedom

BINA DESA

NGO Federation of Nepal

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