



The Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations Forum (ECSF) Development Towards institutionalization of Vibrant CSOs.

Introduction

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are a non-governmental organization, nonpartisan, not for profit entity, established at least by two or more persons on voluntary basis and registered to carry out any lawful purpose. They include civic issues oriented, religious, and educational interest groups or associations, Community Based organizations and professional bodies. They are generally non-state, nonprofit, voluntary entities and separate from state and market. According to Jeffrey Clark (2000:4), Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) began emerging in Ethiopia around 1930s and the laws (Civil Code 1960 and 1966 Internal Security Act) has been used to regulate these groups starting from 1960. Though the CSOs (both national and international) registered then were less in terms of number, the 1973-74 and 1984-1985 famines increased their numbers they focused on the provision of humanitarian aid. Since then, CSOs have grown both in number and diversification of their involvement including relief, capacity building, service delivery, development and advocacy works and also had smooth relationship with the country's government. Following the 2005 Ethiopian Election however, the relation between the Ethiopian

government and CSOs started to exhibit suspicion due to the alleged involvement of some CSOs in political activities. This led to the enactment of the Charities and Societies Proclamation 621/2009 which gave ultimate power for the government to control the activities of the CSOs on the one hand, and put excessive restrictions on the work of these organizations on the other hand.

In addition to the aforementioned restrictive law, the CSOs sector of Ethiopia has also been in struggle with various predicaments like lack of coordination and harmonization despite the legal recognition given by the CSOs proclamation to establish Consortia/ Network to coordinate their activities. Although more than 3000 CSOs at Federal and around 1000 at region level were registered and contributing enormously in wide range of poverty reduction and development activities in Ethiopia up until September 2014 according to the Agency's data, the sector has been known to have no apex national platform. Pertinent to this, many stakeholders have agreed that the sector had been suffering from lack of representation in the democratic space of the country, harmonization among its members,

cooperation and collaborative engagement. Consequently, various Networks/Consortia and group representatives of the CSOs operating at Federal and Regional level in Ethiopia came together and established The Ethiopian Civil Societies Organizations Forum (ECSF) in May 2013.

Ethiopian Civil Societies Forum [ECSF] was established with a special legal status of comprising all CSOs and with the scope of operating at the federal and regional level focusing on legal, institutional and operational issues and processes that commonly concern the Civil Societies Organization sector in Ethiopia. Since its establishment then, ECSF has accomplished a number of commendable achievements within very difficult legal and political environments prevailing in Ethiopia. In nut shell, this brief newsletter is designed to communicate highlights of ECSF's background information which starts with the rationale for its establishment, major achievements it has recorded, challenges it has encountered, lessons acquired and way forward.

Vision

ECSF Envisions to Create a Strong and Vibrant CSOs for sustainable Development.

Mission

Ensure the existence of enabling environments for charities and societies sectors through strong representations, constructive dialogue and partnership using consortiums and other legal establishments as plat for action.

Roles and Responsibilities

The Forum's major roles and responsibilities were identified in Article 6 of its Statute which mainly focuses on facilitating the collaborative engagements of CSOs towards the creation of the necessary systems and infrastructures conducive for the affairs of as well as meaningful participation of CSOs in the development of Ethiopia. To this end, the forum works closely with partners such as the Ethiopian government, bilateral agencies and private sectors.

Background of the Forum

Ethiopian Civil Societies Forum (ECSF) is a non-partisan, independent, inclusive and voluntary national platform that focuses on solving the common concerns and challenges of the Civil Societies Organizations (CSOS) in Ethiopia. It was pointed out that ECSF's establishment was caused by gaps prevailing in the CSOs sector of Ethiopia including lack of coordination, consortia, and networks coupled with the deteriorating relationship between CSOs and the government of Ethiopia following 2005 Election. Data from the forum's documentation show that an Informal National Taskforce chaired by PANE and hosted at CCRDA was set-up in 2009 whose members had discussed with the prime minster and the parliament of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) on the gaps of CSOs Sector. After the enormous efforts exerted by the National Taskforce, PANE, CCRDA and NEWA through discussions with the Agency on creating platform for the period of three years, the consensus was reached to prepare a Term of Reference which later becomes a statute

of the Forum and it was established as Forum in may 2013. The forum's leadership Team members were chosen based on the general Assembly and its statute invites Seven Executive Members and Fifteen Subcommittee members summed up to Twenty-Two leadership Team Members.

The Forum brings together all the Consortia/ Networks registered under the Civil Society Agency which automatically become a legitimate member and those CSO with no Consortia/Network need to be represented. The statute of this Forum specifies three categories of members namely: Associate members, Full members and Honorary Members. Any Civil Society Organization, international organization and governmental organization can apply for an associate member, provided that it fulfills the conditions, rights and duties listed in the Forum's statute. Full membership is open to all consortia/ forums of civil societies and networks for CSOs, legally registered at all structural levels (Federal and regional) and operating in Ethiopia. Upon the recommendations of the forum, the board of the forum may award the status of Honorary Membership for individuals and institutions as well.

The major objective of the Forum was to establish a formal, non-statutory institutional arrangements whereby CSOs actively participate in coordinating range of initiatives aimed at creating conducive environment for their effective engagement and contribution to the national development endeavors; establish an institutional platform to ensure effective administration, management and representations of CSOs registered and operate in Ethiopia; and lay foundation for

the establishment of necessary arrangements guiding the interaction between CSOs, government bodies and other relevant stakeholders. Since establishment, the forum has been implementing activities categorized under five strategic pillars: harmonize the Civil Societies sector, engaging in research and dialogue in different sectoral issues, ensuring representation of CSOs, image building of the CSOs and Capacity Building which vividly was depicted in the forum's previous strategic plan (2016-2020). Currently ECSF is under way to develop another five-year strategic plan (2021-2025) and implementing it starting from January 2021.

Achievements

a. System Building

Since its establishment, ECSF has carried out various activities to resolve legal, Institutional, and Operational issues of CSOs through different strategies such as evidence-based dialogues by engaging media, research-based advocacy, publications of cases, consultative meetings and lobbying.

In connection to this, the forum has conducted different discussion with relevant government officials by engaging CSOs to improve their relationship, plaid the leading role in coordinating input gathering activities for the improvement of CSOs proclamation, conducted capacity building activities, organized different platforms for CSOs, made crucial discussion with CSOs Agency officials on reforming the restrictive laws, Organized a consultative workshop to draft the new CSOs proclamation, held interviews with three forum's leadership members

using air time (October-November, 2015) on Afro FM on issues related to CSOs, Adopted CSOs regulations and arranged different familiarization workshop after the enactment of CSOs proclamation.

In addition to the activities stated above, the forum has organized trainings on the new CSOs law (no. 1113/2019) for Consortia/ Networks of CSOs so as to enhance their understanding on the law, acquainted with and get capacity to exercise the new law and its directives in all their projects and programs. The training has also aimed at increasing the understanding and capacity of the Civil Society's (CSO's) key personnel on the new law so that they would be able to implement the law in their organizational efforts. In fact, the forum was mindful of creating conducive environment via such trainings in a way to create the vibrant civil societies in the sector.

b. Institutionalization of the System

In order to realize the envisioned system development toward creating vibrant CSOs in the country, the forum has undertaken remarkable activities by developing and executing project base major activities. Some of these indicated below:

Firstly, the forum has conducted four major activities with the generous support of National Endowment for Democracy (NED) which include: organizing a dialogue among the government, media agencies and CSOs on the role that rights-based CSOs could play in democratization process

of Ethiopia so as to increase the public trust on the sector. The forum has also broadcasted dialogues and consultative meetings regarding COVID-19 on Television. These information were disseminated using five local languages with the intention of creating awareness about the pandemic. Furthermore, training of trainees (TOT) has been delivered on the new CSO's regulations



and directives for 90 participants with the aim of repositioning the stakeholders to the new CSOs' environment in four regional states namely: Amhara, Oromia, Tigray and Sidama regions. Lastly, 3000 copies of newsletters showing the Forum's background, achievements, encounters and lessons drawn have produced and disseminated to the stakeholders

Secondly, the forum has conducted various activities such as: promoting citizen-State engagement, enhancing the capacity of Networks/consortia and CSOs with regard to ensuring public inputs in the justice reform processes, coordinate engagement of CSOs in national agendas and facilitate CSOs council establishment. Under the first activity, the forum has undertaken tasks which include: facilitating the preparation of

documents for CSO Council establishment, conducting regular consultative meetings among GO-CSO on quarterly basis so as to foster a culture of collaboration and trust, adapting CSOs code of Conduct and organizing familiarization workshops. In relation to enhancing the capacity of Networks/Consortia and CSOs, the forum has conducted training of trainees on the new CSOs proclamation (#1113/2019) to reposition them to the new environment, Training of Trainees on Human Right Based Approach for CSOs engaging in development programs, basic training on detecting, monitoring, documenting, and reporting of Human Rights for CSOs leaders and conducted mid-term evaluation. When it comes to coordinate engagement of CSOs in national agendas, the forum has undertaken different activities to prevent COVID-19 pandemic, organized a platform for CSOs and the country's prime minister, arranged discussion for more than 50 CSOs on ten-year perspective plan and coordinated the participation of CSOs on the Green Legacy.

Thirdly, the forum has trained the CSOs on the integration of Human Rights Based Approach in all their development intervention. This was to help them integrate new experiences of ensuring human right standards in their development programs, detect, monitor, document, and report on reforms in justice sector as well as human rights protection & promotion. To this end, the training has aimed to mainstream basic human rights, right of the children, national, legal and institutional framework and standard issues for protection of human right in to the

major development programs these CSOs are implementing in the country.



The forum has also delivered trainings on Detecting, monitoring, documenting and reporting the effort of government on justice sector reforms and human right protection and promotion. This was a virtual training in fear of the COVID-19 pandemic designed for the Civil Societies' leaders so as to engage them in watchdog activities with regard to what is going on in the justice system of the country. In short, the training has aimed at strengthening the operational capacity of CSOs leaders towards ensuring CSOs' engagement in the process of legal and judicial reforms in the Country. The training has also focused on enhancing the operational capacities of networks/consortia of CSOs thereby improving their ability to facilitate public engagements to the emerging changes in the legal and judiciary frameworks.

Fourthly, the forum was able to implement the project: "Enhancing Human Right Protection (HRP), Gender Equality (GE) and Social Inclusion (SI) in Responses to COVID-19 Pandemic in Ethiopia" in response to the Pandemic during the hard time for the whole world. The forum was also able to develop a

nationwide project and mobilized a resource from the development partner namely CSSP2 which amounted to 20 million Birr for 6 months period. The project was meant to be implemented by engaging 16 organizations in all regions and two cities, by participating one consortium for each region/city, and five organizations on cross cutting activities (Human Rights, Gender, Elderly, HIV/AIDS, and disabilities). In short, among the major activities accomplished were: Improve public access to proper information on COVID-19 pandemic, capacitating CSOs and community representatives in advocating for Human Right Protection, Gender Equality and Social Inclusive in responding to COVID-19, improving vulnerable communities such as women, children, elders, PLHIV, prisoners, pastoralists and the like's access to public service pertinent to the pandemic, Strengthen the inclusive emergency operations by CSOs in support of government's responses to the pandemic and enhanced the CSOs capacity in safeguarding human rights based responses to the COVID-19 pandemic at work places. Not only this but also the forum has undertaken various capacity building trainings for journalists in promoting

the COVID-19 protocols for the public, conducted assessment on the impact of the pandemic on the marginalized communities, provided different promotional kits like posters, banners, and other necessary materials used for promoting the COVID-19 protocols.

Furthermore, the forum has locally mobilized more than 5.3 million ETB and provided financial, and in-kind support for the vulnerable community in Addis Ababa, and other regions to minimize the risk of COVID-19 and fighting against the pandemic.

Result:

As a result of conducting the activities mentioned above but not limited to them, the forum has reaped encouraging outputs along with CSOs in general and its members in particular. Some of the outputs gained were: collective voicing recorded, GOV-CSO relationship improved, attitudes towards the CSOs sector have also improved, some restrictive directives [like 90/10,30/70, etc] under amendment processed, member COSs were encouraged after being represented by ECSF and all stakeholders of the sector have gained awareness on the importance



of the platform created for them. The forum's unreserved effort has not only yielded the few aforementioned outputs but also brought about remarkable outcomes within the CSOs sector and even at the country level. Some of the positive outcomes resulted include: the new CSOs proclamation 1113/2019, the number of registered CSOs increased, COSs council established in the country's parliament, government started consulting CSOs which could be stated in terms of the increasing tendency of the government to consult CSOs before developing new policies, coordination, collaboration and harmony among the CSOs has exhibited observable improvement.

In connection to the aforementioned results (outputs and outcomes), some indicators are being detected in relation to the improvement in overall service delivered for the public by CSOs sectors, reduced duplications of works among the CSOs as a result of improved coordination and sector's environment and the increased CSOs support for government which believed to bring about impact on the lives of citizens though not evaluated yet.

Challenges and barriers

In the course of implementing and registering all the aforementioned activities and results, the forum has not walked on the smooth way, rather has confronted various discouraging situations. Some of the major challenges faced the forum are:

- The erupt of Covid19 pandemic in the year 2020,

- Lack of sufficient and reliable source of fund for that enable to fulfill the required human person requirements and logistic. Necessary logistics were not available in sufficient amount and quantity,
- Inconvenience of office which had posed pressure on working environment,
- Difficulty in getting appropriate human power (professional) and holding them for a period of time,
- The low performance rate by some co-implementers, which resulted the low performance of aggregate result,

The listed challenges are few among the major ones which the forum has confronted and managed to settle.

Lessons

From the past efforts we have exerted in attaining our objectives and goals, we have drawn various lessons which could be replicated in other areas of our activities. Some of these lessons are listed below but not limited to

- COVID-19 pandemic catastrophic pressure has taught us to see for different execution options like virtual communications and meetings in discharging the responsibilities which would not have been tried otherwise.
- While struggling on behalf of CSOs to make their voice heard, we have learned that intense sense of collaboration could

be formed with relevant government bodies which would change rough way to smooth in the course of projects and program implementation for CSOs and even raise results.

Joint planning and implementation would lead to strong collaboration among civil society organizations and thereby pay them back with high achievements which they would never attain alone in years.

Way for ward/Aspirations

ECSF has attained notable results ranging from voicing for the CSOs to the reformation of restrictive laws, and establishment of the CSOs Council in the country, which was

enacted by the Proclamation No.1113/2019. Now the forum is contemplating to scale up the stunning achievements registered in the CSOs sector so far to the country level for the betterment of the citizens' life. Among the areas needing further attention is strengthening the coordination, collaboration, and over all relationship among the CSOs; support the CSOs council established by the parliament to stand on its feet, and further strengthen those who are newly established. Furthermore, the forum would come up with additional innovative ideas which further deepens the impacts brought about so far.

The following list shows our Active Donors in year 2020:

Name of Donor

Civil Societies Support Program (CSSP2)



National Endowment for Democracy (NED)



Feteh- (Justice) Activity Project



Irish AID



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