

## How Critical is Civil Society in the COVID-19 Control?

In Development Studies the idea of civil society has gained prominence over the last two decades. Normatively, civil society has been considered as an agent for limiting authoritative rule, spearheading social movements, minimizing unnerving impacts of market forces, ensuring political accountability, and improving governance. Hence, the definitions of civil society are diverse and rooted in competing social and political philosophies.

According to one definition, civil societies articulate the relationship between state and family, dominated by voluntarily functioning social groups and organizations that have some autonomy in relation to the state. These operational social organizations advance their interests, values and identities. The state includes governments, judiciary, legislature, and armed forces. In late 1980s, UNDP, World Bank and other international development agencies adopted the term civil society into its discourse because of its inclusiveness, containing within its scope private sector.

Civil society in the form of NGOs are more concerned with more specific and targeted interest-group issues such as women empowerment, environmental sustainability, human rights, poverty alleviation, and education. The forms of social organization as encompassed by the term civil society are varied: (i) associational which share an organizational objective, (ii) community-driven which are held together by social bonds and reciprocities, and (iii) interest groups defined along the axis of pursuits of economic interest and political power.

In the context of Pakistan, all three forms of social organization as stated in the preceding text have been existent, both historically and socio-culturally. Historians claim that civil society in Pakistan when situated within social movements can be traced back to the war of independence against the British colonial rule. Outlined along this axis, civil society is both associational and community driven.

The landscape of civil society movements in Pakistan has been dominated by three trends. Starting with the revivalists who have spirited against the encroachment of social, physical and virtual spaces of the state. Second, the community-driven approaches that have questioned the legitimacy of the coalition between state and market economy, and lastly the communal approaches that, in addition to questioning the authority, also resort to constitutional means for meeting targeted goals such as empowering marginalized groups, alleviating poverty, and so and so forth.

### Civil Society and COVID-19

In the wake of COVID-19 pandemic that has spread rapidly across over 200 countries in roughly less than 3 months, the role of civil society is turning out to be more critical. In order to outline the roles and responsibilities which civil society across the world can perform, the experts at Harvard Kennedy School have recently chalked out a few parameters along which public challenges can be addressed and solutions can be highlighted.

The strategy advised by the Harvard school suggests that, without falling into the terrain of politicizing the message and sensationalizing the news, credible communication is a key to contain and mitigate the effects of COVID-19. When information related to public national emergency is politicized, the citizens' trust on the government drops which may lead to reduced number of tests and hindrance in public vaccination efforts. At the communal level what needs to be done is to inculcate the spirit of creating awareness and campaigning through disseminating reliable information, providing guidance, and technical assistance to control coronavirus. Next in discussion is a composite approach in which civil societies in coalition with public sector, should frame a global approach to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. This approach has to function in a multi-pronged fashion and should set its focus on: taking on board multiple stakeholders (the most significant perhaps being the public health specialists); signifying socio-economic impacts, specifying the vulnerable groups; and countering mis- and dis-information about COVID-19. Abrupt disruption as an institutionalized policy rhetoric is also mandatory to control community spread of COVID-19.

This strategy has been implemented across the world, with varying degrees of realization by states about the havoc that the pandemic can cause or has caused. Alongside devising swift strategies to prevent, control and treat COVID-19, it is also significant on the part of civil societies to claim transparency from state regarding

national plans for control and prevention, guidelines about allocation of scarce resources, and effective utilization of technologies. Investments in vaccines and mobilization of physical and human resources are also mandatory as prevention strategies. Another important domain to be looked at introspectively is human rights, which in the wake of debates on partial vs. full lockdowns and tightened travel as well as border policies may get ignored by the state. Hence, the sensitization to strike a balance between protecting health rights and respecting human rights is among the responsibilities of the civil society. National spending in the wake of economic challenges being faced by the countries need to be prioritized as well.

## **COVID-19 and the Civil Society in Pakistan**

Time will tell as to what extent Pakistan's civil society (or civil societies across the world, for that matter) fulfills these criteria or meets these parameters. As for now the assistance being provided by different community-based organizations, NGOs, peer groups, pressure groups, and philanthropic groups is admirable. For instance, Al-Khidmat foundation is distributing ration to the vulnerably poor across Pakistan in addition to providing soaps, sanitizers and face masks. Edhi foundation has collected funds to import testing kits which are being distributed to the government hospitals. Saylani Welfare is another charity organization which is running a cell phone application and telephonic services where the vulnerably poor can register for ration and other items of necessary consumption. Other organizations such as Alamgir Trust, Pakistan Islamic Medical Association and Baitul Salam Trust (among other NGOs) are also assisting government healthcare centers and staff members in setting quarantines, providing medical equipment and running tests.

The civil society has taken swifter strategizing decisions than most of the state functionaries in Pakistan, but these efforts can have a bigger impact if coordinated efforts are targeted at. What further need to be done is to devise a unified strategy rather than looking out for ad hoc approaches which in any scenario are not very useful. In order to devise such a unified strategy, the responsibility rests with the federal government.

Federal government has many institutions operating under its domain which can change the regulations of medical staff. These authorities do not rest with the provincial governments. So, there should be one representative body responsible for taking such critical decisions in case of national emergencies such as COVID-19. And the body's decision must be guided by a panel of experts which must include infectious disease expert, IT expert, management information expert, epidemiologists, neurologists, lab experts, virologists, bureaucrats, representatives of provincial governments, and civil society representatives. This group should be devising the strategy and presenting different options and scenarios to the Prime Minister. In this way one authentic information body will be giving out information to the PM and subject to approval will be disseminated to the public. In this way the role of civil society will be more and its contribution widespread. More importantly, the data of vulnerable groups can also be used by the state-civil society alliance to target the at-risk groups and provide amenities.

Civil society's human resource can also be of help to the state institutions to meet the public healthcare needs because of COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, the civil society interacts with people at a level the state cannot, or at least does not. In times like these such contacts can come in handy to reach these, often marginalized people, who are in need.