

## **G20: Why civil society should be at the table**

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As the G20 – the world’s wealthiest and most powerful states – meet in Argentina throughout 2018, in preparation for their leaders’ summit in late November, the important role that civil society plays in creating healthy and peaceful societies should also be on their agenda. As the host of this year’s summit, Argentina has an opportunity to engender better understanding and recognition of why it is crucial to enable civil society’s work and open up more space for civil society in the G20 processes.

### ***Difficult conditions for civil society***

These are not easy times for civil society, and this should concern all of us. The difficulties that civil society is facing are similar to, and have the same roots as, those that democracy is going through.

In our most recent [State of Civil Society Report](#), CIVICUS notes with concern that spaces for democratic action are shrinking. Over 2017 the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), our online monitoring tool, documented systemic problems in civic space - the space in which people can organise, mobilise and communicate with each other freely to shape the political and social structures around them - in 109 countries: more than half of the countries in the world. Only 4 per cent of the world’s population live in countries where civic space is open, that is, where conditions exist for them to properly exercise the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression, which are the bedrock of civic space. What is even more disturbing is that we are seeing serious attacks against civic space even in countries where the argument for democracy was thought to be won. In other words: we are seeing that rights cannot be taken for granted once and for all; they are, instead, at the centre of a never-ending battle.

And that is precisely civil society’s battle, as it mobilises to preserve the conditions of its own existence, which are also the conditions of a democratic and pluralistic civic space.

### ***The value of civil society***

It is impossible to overestimate the contribution of civil society to the development of the global architecture of human rights - institutions, agencies, treaties, agreements, norms, standards - and their functioning. Back in the 1990s, a former director of the UN Center for Human Rights [estimated](#) that 85 per cent of the information they worked

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with came from civil society. Without civil society's work, who would call states to account for their actions? It goes without saying that many existing human rights mechanisms are deficient and insufficient, but who but civil society struggles without pause to give them teeth?

As [Jürgen Habermas](#), a leading contemporary philosopher and sociologist, once noted, social movements and civil society organisations have the ability to function as sensors of critical situations. Anchored in the *lifeworld*, they are more sensitive than the political and administrative systems to perceive new challenges, identify them and provide the appropriate interpretative frameworks. If we look at past few decades, it is civil society organisations and social movements that have brought to the public agenda key issues ranging from possible nuclear holocaust to ecological threats, gender inequities, the dysfunctions of globalisation and the complexities of multiculturalism. Committed civil society organisations and activists have helped set the course on these issues. Last year we saw an example of it, as the treaty on nuclear weapons was approved, for which ICAN, a civil society coalition, received the Nobel Peace Prize; and we are seeing it right now in the form of efforts to develop a binding treaty on transnational corporations and human rights.

Civil society groups play well a wide diversity of roles, and in some of these they are truly irreplaceable. Crucially, given that not even the most democratic of states is sufficiently equipped to control itself, civil society is the guardian of rights and freedoms; in fact, its existence can be traced back to the very origins of the liberal state - a state that found in civil society the limits to the exercise of its own power. Civil society imposes limits and demands explanations: it calls governments to account. It not only monitors compliance with states' obligations, reports rights violations, assists victims and seeks reparations; it also continually calls on the public administration to deliver for the benefit of citizens. In that sense, it tries to help the state give the best of itself.

We are not just watchdogs. We are many, and each of us specialises in something. Among us are experts able to contribute to public policy, innovative thinkers devising solutions for global challenges - inequality, climate change, violent conflict - and communicators capable of translating technical jargon into the plain language of citizens, as well as of bringing citizens' perspective back to decision-making arenas. Governments and multilateral organisations, including the G20, have much to benefit from our capacities and of the information we produce, in the same way that the global human rights system already does.

Obviously, civil society cannot play all of its roles on its own; one of our biggest tasks is to form networks and look for allies in sectors that have the power - the capacity to make binding decisions - that we lack and that, although by themselves will not lead the change that we seek, are in a position to help us achieve it.

Instances of collaboration between governments and civil society have mushroomed in recent years, but in many of them the promise with which we were summoned has remained unfulfilled, as our contributions have often not translated into a difference in decision-making. The co-creation standard promoted by initiatives such as the Open Government Partnership is far from becoming a normal practice in national arenas - and at the global level, the situation is not much better.

### ***Civil society and the G20***

There is an erosion of multilateral institutions underway that is alarming. When they raise concerns about human rights, multilateral bodies are being increasingly attacked as propagators of cosmopolitan values and utopian standards, and as obstacles to the unbridled persecution of national self-interest. As powerful states renege on their obligations and de-fund them, international institutions (and notably UN agencies) are turning to partnerships with the private sector. For civil society, this can mean that it is not being granted the same kind of access that is available to representatives of the private sector.

These challenges of access are abundantly clear at the G20: despite all we have to offer, we do not sit at the same table; we are treated as second-class partners. Our points on important issues - such as addressing inequality and putting in place economic policies that benefit many rather than a few – tend to go unheard. Is it any wonder, then, that citizens, in one country after another, express their distrust towards governments that they perceive as not listening and too distant from citizens, or as too intimately linked with narrow business interests? The G20 discusses policies that have a huge, sometimes brutal, impact on our lives and societies. As civil society, we should be allowed to bring in the voices of the people, real and diverse, who will be affected by public policies promoted in these forums.

Active since 2013, the C20 is one of the seven G20 engagement groups, meant to establish links with actors other than governments, also including business (B20), labour (L20), think tanks (T20), science (S20), women (W20) and youth (Y20). The C20 and its [working groups](#) are the main mechanisms through which civil society has an opportunity to contribute to the G20, and civil society groups use them to place on the agenda issues of concern, including some that have traditionally been particularly immune to public scrutiny and citizen participation.

However, the record of civil society participation in the G20 in general, and in its working groups in particular, is mixed at best. We see the fact that there is an agenda item of the Anticorruption Working Group around which governments deal with the private sector and civil society on an equal footing as an important achievement. But

this is an exception rather than the rule; there needs to be more progress in this direction.

There are also challenges around who can participate. Those who attend these forums are, in a sense, the privileged ones, having passed several tests: to obtain the resources to attend, to be allowed to travel by their governments, to be allowed in by the host government, to have some degree of confidence that they will not be subject to reprisals upon return. Many are excluded because they are working in conditions of highly restricted civic space. This underlines the need for civil society to maintain broad and diverse networks, so the voices of the underprivileged can still be transmitted.

Sadly, some G20 states clearly see civil society as a threat to be excluded. It surely is for those governments that see rights as obstacles to be overcome rather than commitments to fulfil or promises to keep. But for governments seeking a more equitable distribution of the benefits of development, civil society offers a real opportunity.

Given the monumental global challenges we all face, the voice of civil society is today more necessary than ever. Working together is not an option; it is a survival imperative. The world would be a very different place, much more cruel and inhospitable than it is today, if civil society had not done or was not doing its job. And we cannot afford to let this happen, if this is the planet we want to leave to our children.

As the G20 meets in Buenos Aires, the world will be looking to Argentina to show leadership in the G20 Presidency. Argentina should lead by example and demonstrate that it is committed to broadening the participation of civil society in decision-making. The G20, and Argentina as its presiding country, now have a real opportunity to work with their citizens and the members of global civil society that will be soon convening in Buenos Aires, or watching closely from a distance.