

A Mott Foundation Conversation with Ingrid Srinath

Ingrid Srinath has been the secretary general of CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation since May 2008. In this Mott conversation with Communications Officer Maggie Jaruzel Potter, Srinath discusses CIVICUS' international work and the strengths – and challenges – of the civil society sector.

Maggie Jaruzel Potter (MJP): *What role does CIVICUS play in the international civil society sector?*

Ingrid Srinath (IS): What CIVICUS does is use a very wide definition of civil society. It is literally defined as the arena outside the state and the market where ordinary citizens get together to do something larger than their individual interests. We include not just nonprofits organizations, or NGOs (non-governmental organizations), but also labor movements, trade unions, faith-inspired initiatives, and farmers' cooperatives. It really is any space that people get together to pursue something larger than their own individual interests

The way we do this is – we, like all organizations – have three pillars. Our three pillars are: First, defending civil society rights, which surely means that there is an enabling environment where civil society can exist in the first place and then express itself freely and engage in policy development. The second thing we do is help civil society share best practices with each other, particularly in the area of accountability. The third thing we do is try to enhance civil society's capacity to influence policy.

MJP: *What are some of the challenges currently facing civil society around the globe?*

IS: Civil society in the world we live in right now is facing multiple threats. We have seen now, for the last 40 years almost, a progressive narrowing of the space for dissent, a narrowing of space for democratic engagement by ordinary people. CIVICUS' role really is to ensure that the democratic space is protected and is widened. Thanks to the "war on terror," for example, governments around the world have used it as an excuse to clamp down on civil society engagement and policy.

Simultaneously, of course, we have seen converging crises on climate, energy and food – all on top of problems we were dealing with earlier: poverty, discrimination, and exclusions of various kinds. So, the financial crisis has actually exacerbated all of that by cutting funding to civil society and also by making it seem like the only decisions that matter are economic ones. So if you are not focused on financial sector reform, or if you are not focused on implementing a financial bailout, suddenly you are off the radar.

It has become almost more critical in the last year and half to find ways to ensure that civil society does have, in fact, its voice heard in these big global decisions that we are trying to make; decisions that affect all of us, regardless of where you live. You could be in a fishing community in Bangladesh or an unemployed person living here in Michigan and the decisions they are making affect all of us. We need to make sure now, more than ever in a sense, that we have a voice in influencing those decisions.

MJP: Could you share some examples of how CIVICUS is helping build and strengthen the work of nonprofit organizations globally?

IS: There are three ways in which CIVICUS does this. One is by producing what we like to believe are world-class knowledge practices. The Civil Society Index, for example, allows civil society in 60 countries to actually do a dipstick reading of the health of their civil society. The report itself has become a way to compare across countries to see who is doing well on what – and what they can learn from each other. Also, it is an advocacy tool. If you are looking at a report on civil society in Tunisia, you can use the Morocco report to say, “Why is Morocco doing a hell of a lot better than us on civil society?” It is a fabulous advocacy networking tool.

The other thing CIVICUS does is convene. We have, for example, a network of 57 national umbrella associations of NGOs and nonprofits. That network is an excellent field-learning network, so what is happening here in the U.S. on policies that effect civil society is something that the U.S. members can share with members from Fiji, members from Europe, and members from countries in Africa.

The third sort of thing we do is provide field-learning networks. For example, in the international advocacy networks, these are the big boys: the Greenpeaces, the Amnesty Internationals, the CARES, the Save the Childrens. It really helps them to have a better accountability standard and that is something that we have been able to do through the INGO (International NGO) Network. So there are a number of different ways – through knowledge sharing, peer learning and through absolute convening – that CIVICUS manages to fulfill its mission.

CIVICUS, based in Johannesburg, South Africa, has received Mott Foundation support for its work since 1994 through the Foundation’s Civil Society program.