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**Civic space, politics and decisions**

A civic space that meaningfully engages civil society with policymakers can contribute to improved public policy decisions. This article looks at some of the factors that affect a civic space’s effectiveness.

The concept of civil society, as we think of it in the present, arose in the eighteenth century. The concept refers to social life, that is not organized primarily by the state, and which is freer and instituted around the freedom of the press, association and speech. The push to promote civil society gathered momentum after the end of the cold war, and emerged as one of the cornerstones of democracy at the turn of the millennium.

Along with the growing popularity of the idea of a civil society was an abundance of different meanings attached to the concept. A widely used definition, given by Michael Walzer in the late 1990s and which matches the way in which the concept is being used in this article, is that civil society is human association, without coercion, between the individual and the state, in which people undertake collective action for normative and substantive purposes, relatively independent of the government.

This definition, while emphasizing freedom in the lack of state coercion, also points to how a civil society aspires to collectively reach decisions or undertake actions that can in turn influence public policy decisions. Thus, civil society is very much a structure that can exercise political influence.

The popularity of civil society is underpinned by the enhanced prominence of democracy in the post-cold war era. Francis Fukuyama, in his 1992 book ‘The End of History and the Last Man’, writes about the ascendancy of the liberal democratic form of government following the implosion of the USSR. In its effective form, civil society works in tandem with a prevailing democratic system of government. Here a well-functioning civil society is in consonance with a democratic system’s aspiration for participation and deliberation.

Civic space is defined by the intergovernmental economic organization OECD on its Open Government webpage as “the set of legal, policy, institutional, and practical conditions necessary for non-governmental actors to access information, speak, associate, organize and participate in public life.” This idea of civic space also has parallels with Jurgen Habermas’s idea of a public sphere, a place where people can come together to discuss public concerns and actions.

The extent of the deliberative interaction between the organizations, groups or stakeholders in the civic space can vary progressively from information sharing, consultation to collaboration and partnership. Civic space interactions can provide valuable input into specific stages of the public policy decision-making process including in agenda setting, drafting of policy, implementing policy and monitoring of implementation.

A vibrant civic space can promote debate, dialogue and deliberation; and this is key to the civic space providing input into the public decision-making process. It can provide a forum that permits more open-ended interaction across diverse groups and can lead to a more genuine exchange of ideas and a better understanding of alternative positions. The civic space can also provide a potent alternate arena for highlighting problems and solutions that have not been accorded due attention by the mainstream media or by the government.

Governments play a critical role in establishing an effective civic space within their borders. The government needs to provide and protect the right of its citizens to organize and to come together, publicly or privately, and debate their interests. The right of peaceful dissent also needs to be meaningfully permitted.

Freedom of expression and the freedom to access information are two very important rights. These freedoms will enrich political debate in the civic space by giving voice to those who may have been marginalized and by placing a broader range of alternative decision choices in front of policy influencers and policymakers.

The public also has a role in enriching the civic space by educating themselves on the issues and by participating in public discussion and debates. Alongside the public, the print and broadcast media have very influential roles to play in disseminating public information and in sharing different views on a particular issue. The need for the media to provide accurate, timely, and balanced coverage cannot be over emphasized.

Along with the large traditional media houses, the new social media sources also need to responsibly present information. While the digital era has made information sharing cheaper and easier, it has also contributed to a proliferation of misinformation. Regulating social media, such as Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook, is a challenge that is being faced by both the developing and developed countries. Regulation of hate speech and fake news are two of the many challenges being faced by social media organizations.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are a very consequential player in enriching civic space. CSOs are not a homogenous group of organizations but rather a diverse group that can vary widely from each other. They can have different varieties of governance structures and objectives. Also, not all CSOs are non-profit organizations and there can be CSOs that are driven by the profit motive. Additionally, the primary purpose of all CSOs does not have to be achieving the good of the general public. Some SCOs are focused on providing benefits to specific segments of the population or to specific groups and some CSOs are driven by the interest of their members rather than the interest of the population in general. The nature of CSOs in a civic space needs to be carefully considered before expectations of improving outcomes can be realistically reconsidered.

Pakistan has much ground to cover before its civic space can be as conducive to giving quality input into the policy decision-making process, as is the civic space of countries like Canada and Sweden. The V-Dem Institute’s 2019 data shows that the conditions for CSOs were moderately repressive in Pakistan; though the situation here was seen to be somewhat better than other countries such as Russia, India, Uzbekistan, etc. Though the government is making efforts to improve things, the vast need for improvement in the civic space underscores the need for Pakistan to take bold policy steps now.

Improving Pakistan’s civic space will help provide better input into the policy decision-making process. The government needs to take steps to strengthen freedom of expression and the freedom to access information. However, it is important to recognize that in addition to the government, CSOs, media and the public also have an important part to play in improving Pakistan’s civic space.

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