

Current challenges of local CSOs in Myanmar

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Insight from Thuta Nyana

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1. Background

The definition of philanthropy

The word ‘Philanthropy’ originates from the Greek and it can be broadly defined as “Love of mankind”. A more updated definition is “private initiatives for the public good which combines an original humanistic tradition with a social scientific aspect”. Basically, philanthropy is “an idea or an action that is done to better humanity and usually involves some sacrifice as opposed to being done for a profit motive.” (The Medium, 2018).

Myanmar and perception on philanthropy

Traditionally, the people of Myanmar perceive philanthropic work as a good-will activity to help people in the community. In Myanmar word the philanthropy names ‘Parah-hitha’ (actually it is the mixed usage of Myanmar and Pali language); Parah means other person, Hitha means benefits. So the Parah-hitha means for the sack of the benefit of other people.

For years, most of Myanmar people especially in rural areas are familiar with the philanthropy as a good work since young. For example, for centuries Myanmar

pheasants involved in repairing roads, building bridges, donating money for the development of local community. In addition, the elderly are used to guide young generation to keep a balance between the benefits of self and others.

Common areas of philanthropy in Myanmar

The more significant evidence in Myanmar was the clear booming of philanthropic activities after the cyclone 'Nargis' in 2008. The common areas of philanthropic work are for the development of community, funeral services, environmental sanitation, donation and religious activities. Again, one of the interesting findings in Myanmar is most of the philanthropic activities focus on funeral services. Except a few groups or organizations, it is also observed that various Buddhist, Christian, Hindi and Islamic groups work together for the development of community.

The philanthropy and civil society organizations

In Myanmar, it is clear that many civil society organizations (CSOs) are formed based on the philanthropic spirit of the ordinary citizen. So it is impossible to make a clear distinction between philanthropic attitude and characteristic of a CSO.

The definition of CSO

Definition of CSO is also diverse. For instance, as defined by Advisory Group on Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness - "voluntary organizations with governance and direction coming from citizens or constituency members, without significant government-controlled participation or representation" (OECD, 2009) and as in a broader term, "independent development actors" by recent Busan Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (OECD, 2011).

Again, by the definition of The World Bank (2019), CSOs refer to a wide range of organizations whether "community groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labor unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations."

In brief, CSOs may be varying type of organizations, from a small informally formed group of people from a community or a profit based organization to very successful INGOs (UNDP, 2013).

However, in this report we would like to refer to those CSO of any non-profit, non-governmental organization or a group of peoples that form locally, and voluntarily for the purpose of social and developmental causes for local community, not including INGO, LNNGO, foundations or faith or religious based organizations.

Civil society and democratic reform

The American Political Sociologist L. Diamond (1994) pointed out that globally, the role of civil society and massive activity of civil society is important in democratic

consolidation. He also added that to understand the tension between civil society and state in the development of democratization required more in-depth knowledge and insight on both parties.

CSOs in Myanmar

Although the first general election for decades in Myanmar held in November 2011 was not initially recognized as a very genuine and encouraging democratic activity (The Burma Fund UN Office, 2011), the country slowly moved away from long decades of authoritarianism towards the democratic transition. By electing the civilian government by its people, all the players including governmental structures in the country gradually started to change. The remaining different size and interests of CSOs are also no exception.

At the same time, in Myanmar, it is still difficult to say no governmental control over CSOs because as a tradition, governmental departments feel that they have an at least some influential role over all the CSOs in the country. In comparing to the past decades, Myanmar shows more numbers and different types of CSOs establishing.

As more CSOs are appearing, their various types of challenges are also emerging with time. This report tries to explore some important and visible challenges that are facing by the newly emerging CSOs in general.



2. Method of Approach

This report was prepared mainly based on some primary qualitative data - the findings during the different interviews done with CSO and some governmental departments during 2018 and 2019 by Thuta Nyana Research Consultants and Directors. It also strengthens by some secondary data from various sources and local governmental departments.



3. Findings

Perception on Philanthropy by Myanmar Society

Many of the people involved in philanthropic work or CSOs assume that they are doing the benefits of people so no rules and regulation is necessary; the only thing what they need is the spirit of helping other people. They will donate whatever they wish or have and no restriction should present on it. Everybody who is interested in philanthropy, or helping people, he/she can join with them and do work for people. They would like to donate as much as they can or based on the collected money. No rule dominates on this principle.

It is also found that many philanthropic groups have no considering of making any financial or long term plan for their activities. They all accept themselves as independently organized groups without any restriction.

The relationships of CSOs

The local CSOs were found to have a working relationship with various organizations, not only with different Ministerial levels, central and regional level, but with other local or international non-governmental organizations such as UN, INGOs, donors, foundations, other CSOs, CBOs, ethnic arm groups etc. These relationship whether positive or negative, it had definitely impact on the desired outcome of those CSOs.

Government and CSOs

The different Ministerial and governmental departments had their own policy, guidelines and regulations. These factors contribute to the relationship with the CSOs. For example, the governmental departments have basic rule of dealing only with the registered organizations when working for the development of the community. It seems the legitimacy is more important than the principle. Such kind of concept is more obvious in older and more conservative generation of the governmental departmental staff. The reverse was also found among some of the younger generation of the governmental staff. Still, many of the governmental staff believes that the fundamental function of the government body is to regulate and monitor those CSOs in general.

Principally, the governmental officials need to follow the policy established by their own Ministry. In order to do so, it was reported that some difficulties in working with CSOs. The governmental officials think that many CSOs do not have own policy or specific rule and regulation to follow. Because of differences in characteristic of governmental departments and CSOs, the poor cooperation between them is observed. Based on the role and responsibility, enthusiasm, policy, and capacity, both parties show the contrasting strengths and weaknesses.

NGOs and CSOs

Based on their own humanitarian or organizational policy, INGOs and UN organizations implement their development projects. When dealing with CSOs, it is reported that they are weak in understanding and applying the international humanitarian guidelines, code of conducts, and technical know-how on community. On the other hand, those CSOs feel that in terms of recognizing the real needs of the community and responding promptly to the needs of the local people, NGOs and UN organizations are inferior to them.

However, from the perspective of CSOs, especially those organizations based on their philanthropic spirit, it is their role in supporting any indiscriminating social issue of the community in need. Most of them would like the free and independent structure and enjoy the community assisting activities. Many of them do not have an interest to develop their organizations more systematic and technically improved. It also causes some obstacles while majority of the stakeholders would like to see them as systematic and well-formed, skillful organization for the development of the local community.

Democracy versus Bureaucracy

It was also found that the challenges and conflicts between development of democracy and bureaucratic administration. People think that the democracy is targeted to people and implementing the task compactable to people's needs. On the other hand, people also recognize the administrative system that apply the hierarchy of commands, from top to bottom is known as red-tape. Similarly, many

governmental personnel assume that such system of administration is effective by because it is strictly based and followed the well-established policy.



4. Insight

We would like to highlight the fact that Myanmar is now in the junction of forward democratization process and backfiring bureaucratization among governmental structures. It is a clear challenge for CSOs and volunteers when dealing with governmental departments. Similarly, the plain volunteerism versus well-organized structures is another dilemma or internal challenge for the volunteers at the moment. Although the residual and existing governmental policy may not be fully compactable for them to act, to move forward, it is essential for the governmental departments to keep awareness of more positive synergic effects when dealing with CSOs. Likewise, for the further development of democratization and development of the country, it also needs to improve the existing not working attitude, and adaptation of the existing policy, more mutual respect to each other and more orientated to the benefits of community. On the other hand, the present CSOs and volunteers require considering recognition and following the rules and regulation, guidelines, and code of conducts in humanitarian practices and adopt the perquisite attitude of flexibility. No matter how and what both parties try to improve the situation, it is sure to take a reasonable time to reach the democratic destination or consolidation of the country. No one knows how long that reasonable time is. The whole process of transition depends on how much all the stakeholders understand the need to change, adapt and committed to do what ought to.

It can be implied that by strengthening the capacity of CSOs and implementing the development of civil society can enhance the progress of the country faster. As conclusion, it is necessary to develop the third-party organizations that can facilitate to establish the required policy, and the practice of following rule and regulation among CSOs. In addition, to be aware of those governmental organizations that if more cooperation of CSO can be achieved, the development of democratic transition in the country will become speedy. To make it happen, some INGOs should lead and take crucial role as an advocator and facilitator or unbiased mediator in between.

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