TRANSITION TO OPEN SPACE: VISIONING AND STRATEGIZING CIVIL SOCIETY IN ARMENIA

The Revolution of Open Hands that happened in April-May 2018 took the international community by surprise. It took place in a semi-authoritarian country on a downward spiral towards more authoritarianism, causing more and more narrowing civic space. The peaceful, non-violent Velvet Revolution created more opportunities for democratic and sustainable development of the country. To operationalize these opportunities, civil society (CS) should invest efforts in sustaining the gains of the Revolution and help build a vision and strategy for initiating or furthering the reform processes in many spheres.

To address the civil society organizations' (CSO) concerns and aspirations for sustaining the gains of the Revolution and moving them forward into a constructive and viable change, EPF organized a CSO strategizing event - an ambitious effort to bring together active civil society representatives, government officials and experts from a large variety of sectors to think together in a three-day setting. The event called "**CSO visioning and strategizing for the future**" was organized as a part of the USAID funded CSO DePo – Civil Society Development program, on August 24-26, 2018.

The big objective of the gathering was to enable civil society actors to define a common vision for the strategic development of Armenia in the new historical circumstances. One hundred twenty participants, 40 from CS, 30 from government and others from local government (LG), social movements, media, community and academic fields, spent 3 days of intensive discussions on issues related to current reforms and transitional processes, clarifying, developing and creating communication and cooperation mechanisms between civil society and the government, formulating innovative ideas, outlining and sharing the civil society vision and the action plans towards its implementation.

The participants chose about nine issues to debate and reflect upon, from around thirty preliminarily suggested areas: the State - CS Relations; Governance / Public Administration; CS Development; Sustainable Development – Environment; Media; Digital Technologies & Tools in the Management Systems; Global Armenia (External Relations); Culture; Role of Women in New Circumstances; Balanced Development of Peripheries; Ideologies & Parties; and Trade Unions. The event produced 140 general and specific recommendations addressed to various groups of stakeholders.

The 3-day event allowed participants to move away from day-to-day issues, think big about global societal challenges, elaborate possible solutions and risks, address unsolved problems and, communicate with government representatives.

Government representatives had an intriguing opportunity of receiving information from the most concerned and informed groups of the society – community-based organizations, civic activists, community representatives; they received first-hand information about what has advanced and what is left behind in terms of reform and democratic change processes; people's aspirations and expectations; visions for Armenia's development in a space expected to become increasingly free and more open for cooperation.

Some highlights of the issues discussed are the following.

Civil Society and Government Cooperation

Civil Society should engage with the Government at an early stage of reform, in order to influence and shape the agenda of ministries, rather than stay merely discussants of proposals coming from the Government, or members of formal public councils which are often dysfunctional. For this CSOs need to become more capable of understanding the priorities that Armenia faces and formulating desired reforms. The government should develop more viable mechanisms and models to be able to utilize the CSO power to affect change. CSOs can also help the government agencies sharing their experience in management best practice: teambuilding, operations management, leadership and motivation building, program management, corporate culture, anticorruption, institutional memory, transparent and fair organization of state procurement processes – tenders, biddings; accountability to public; and transparency of decision making practices. It was suggested that the state changes the allocation principles of its funding available for development, which is currently run by state-owned Project Implementation Units (PIU) and various foundations. The state should engage CSOs as service providers. The state should adhere to the transparent and fair decision making practices in the funding allocation. This will be a clear act reducing corruption risks; it will increase the trust of the civil society towards the government; it will also help saving administrative costs of

maintaining 'heavy' PIUs and foundations. At the same time, CSOs should be able to deliver high quality work. The mechanism of state grant and tender making targeting CSOs is much more flexible than the budgetary commitments to maintaining PIUs and foundations for several years. If CSOs do not deliver a quality service, the state can and should recruit other, newer agents at the next stage of grant and tender advertising.

External Relations (Global Armenia)

CSOs can help better utilize the expertise and capacities of the Diaspora for Armenia's development processes: CS can help create global professional cooperation networks of Armenians and non-Armenians. The Diaspora and international community need to better understand the processes that take place in Armenia, to make informed decisions and invest their capabilities and mental and technical resources in a way tailored to local needs. In this CSOs can also be instrumental. Such two-way cooperation will also stimulate that development and innovation models proven successful globally be invested in local development in Armenia.

Culture

There is a need to integrate culture and cultural thinking in all aspects of transitional development, via promoting **behavioral culture**: the culture of language, the culture of following rules, the culture of adhering to values, ethics, etc., both in the society and in public administration. The end-result, the cultural artefacts, should be tailored to the needs of changing attitudes and behaviors. Such concepts as non-violence, transparency, anti-corruption ethics, avoiding conflict of interest (CoI), tolerance etc. should be promoted via cultural projects producing artefacts which embody these values and give an opportunity to the culture consumer to reflect upon them in his/her life.

Balanced development of Rural and Urban communities

The biggest concerns the group raised were nepotism, conflicts of interest and other biased approaches. These result in the total absence of innovation and motivation from local residents to engage in development projects, leading to disbelief in state funding and social justice. Capacity building of local government (LG) staff is crucial to break this vicious cycle: trainings in skills such as leadership, participation practices, project design and management, anticorruption & CoI, project management, business thinking and other topics are needed. The role of CSOs was emphasized as potent agents that can help LGs incorporate creative, innovative (culture, education, enterprise development) local development strategic plans in community development strategies. Advocacy for policy reform is needed to ensure fair distribution of state appropriations, improved formulas with better criteria and mechanisms of proportional distribution of resources, and promoting development and innovation projects for communities, with intense involvement of community development experts in local budgeting.

Environmental protection

The working group recommended increased transparency and public oversight mechanisms over mining, small hydro-power stations & fisheries, open for public and CSOs, and the need to formulate state strategy for renewable energy resources and management of water resources and infrastructure.

Some recommendations from various groups touched upon issues which are **cross-cutting** across various sectors. These include: Promoting new management culture vs. old rules of game in Governance / Management / Public Administration: ensure generational cooperation between old and new staffs of government, incorporate business thinking, interagency cooperation, inter- and intra-departmental communication, systems for managing public expectations from the government; and pay attention to the public's better understanding of improved policies to make them appreciate the change and to become constructive supporters of change.

The CSOs stated that they have several serious capacity gaps that need to be addressed. These include: understanding policy formulation processes, inter-governmental agreements and foreign policies re Armenia; how to propose policy recommendations and how to advocate for them; how to engage the public and evaluate the changing needs of society and sectors; how to collect and analyze data, write position papers, facilitate sectoral networks, cooperate with and manage expectations in CSO-Government, CSO-LG, CSO-Business contexts; how to engage and retain volunteers, incorporate critical thinking, creative and innovative design into strategies; utilize new media, technologies, and build lasting international partnerships.

To conclude, 120 participants of nine mixed sectoral groups proposed 140 plus recommendations and challenges that CSOs and government agencies, international organizations, donors and development professionals need and can take into account while building priorities and strategies to support Armenia's development in the period of transition from authoritarian to a more democratic state.