

Evian civil society retreat, 8-10 November 2023

At the UN: Civil society in a state of exception

– how to free ourselves from the Stockholm syndrome



At the UN: Civil society in a state of exception

The United Nations, most of its specialized agencies, and some member states, have explicitly recognized the critical role civil society organizations play in formulating, monitoring, and evaluating policy at all levels of governance, including the intergovernmental.

Rhetorical recognition of CSO value notwithstanding, some UN agencies – the World Health Organization (WHO) is a case in point – are increasingly depriving CSOs working at the intersection of global public health, trade, hunger, and the climate crisis of voice, or instead manipulating them to get their engagement as “implementing partners” of global policy programmes, often set outside of UN spaces..

Most nominally democratic member states and CSOs have been slow to respond to these existential threats at the national and multilateral levels of governance. CSOs that are independent of corporate funding are now progressively questioning how best to challenge the increasing encroachment of anti-democratic coalitions of member states and the organized private sector. Two options seem available: to continue petitioning member states to respect our right to participate or alternatively engage in strategic non-cooperation/withdrawal from an increasingly illegitimate process.

How to free ourselves from the Stockholm syndrome?

To unpack the issue of civil society exclusion from the core of UN multilateralism from the perspective of collective and individual experiences and learnings in various UN fora, the Geneva Global Health Hub, in close collaboration with the Geneva office of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, invites a group of 40 civil society practitioners and experts to a two-day retreat in Evian

At the retreat, and in its preparatory process, participants will map and discuss alternative modalities of policy action that are complementary to those currently utilized, hopefully borrowing from direct experiences and learnings. This is in view of starting a process of in-depth consultation and new constitution of CSO capacity to make an impact on the formulation of policies in the common interest at the UN.

Outline of the retreat

As a starting point, we will refer to the trend, in UN institutions, to alienate even accredited CSOs, many of which appear to suffer from a form of Stockholm syndrome. This disorder drives them to revere their captors even as they are relegated to side-lines where they recite one-minute interventions – all that is permitted at the World Health Assembly – like a stunted Greek chorus.

Following discussions will focus on the politics and efficacy of CSO engagement in the multilateral sphere, across the different fields of engagement. Diverse invited constituencies will learn from one another’s specific experiences and dilemmas. Conversations will identify emerging constraints, alignments, divergences in the global development arena. Topics will include global health, food, environment, finance, trade and development, digitalization, disarmament.

Participants will share - experientially and theoretically - informed diagnoses of the status of CSO participation in UN agencies, through the concepts of agency, legitimacy, and representation. They will describe the impact of their work, and the lack thereof, in the various governance settings, including at the level of the global-national dynamic when possible. Presentations will set the scene for a broader discussion with affected populations to hammer out a framework for more effective strategies going forward. Retreat participants should be prepared to discuss and define the elements of bold tactics in the current context where silencing of political voice has become the norm.

The retreat shall explore a new course of constructive resistance to the emergency-inspired security narratives that now sit at the core of the state of exception. Retreat participants will consider the implications of the “right of resistance” to the hijacked state — and by extension the inter-governmental collections of states – a right philosopher Giorgio Agamben claims is operative within “a state of exception”. This must take the form of cohesive actions in the public sphere rather than pervasive cooptation of CSOs, or sullen silence in the face of UN agency marginalization.

Date	8-10 November 2023; arrivals on 8 November (morning), departures on 10 November (afternoon)
Venue	Côté Lac Evian – Ethic étapes – cotelacevian.com
Costs	Accommodation (simple single rooms) and meals are covered. Travel costs can be covered upon request. Please contact Veronica Forin, RLF
Organizers	Geneva Global Health Hub (G2H2) Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (RLF Geneva)
Registration	By invitation only. Please confirm your participation by 30 September 2023
Programme lead	Nicoletta Dentico, G2H2, ndentico@sidint.org Veronica Forin, RLF, Veronica.Forin@rosalux.org
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