

## **“From the frontlines to the trenches: Defending civil society in the time of Covid-19”**

### **An External Assessment of the Project<sup>1</sup>**

The project concept note was based on the format and theme of the call for proposal by CISU, thus stated, “it aims to strengthen resilient and independent civil societies in the Global South, which has experienced a shrinking civic space, including worsening human rights violations and restrictions as a consequence of the COVID-19 crisis”.

Since the Problem Statement was not explicitly stated in the Project Proposal, this evaluator verified the main goal of the Project and the main Problem it wants to address, which the local project implementor, PHILSSA through its National Coordinator, clarified, thus:

At that time of writing the concept note in Aug-Sep 2020, there were minimal information and studies on the effects of government policies and programs during that time on the Covid-19 pandemic on CSOs and civic space, as well as limited collective CSO response actions and programs due to operational and coordinative challenges of the quarantine protocols still being implemented then.

It was also revealed that PHILSSA and DIB proposed a short (initially 8 months) and small (with a budget less than 100K DKK) intervention meant to gather data on the effects of the government policies and programs on CSOs and civic space and identify action points, both tactical and strategic to address issues and challenges that would be identified. The method to be employed was rapid appraisal, as the data collection was meant to be simple and rapid, “given the quarantine protocols being implemented and the situation and capacities of CSOs at the time”, as explained to the evaluator.

#### *Relevance*

In terms of scope, the evaluator found the concept quite broad initially, but as later explained and after an overall sensemaking of the Project outputs, the overall goal was directed towards and aligned with responding to the situation and needs of the country and communities, and more importantly the CSO sector and groups. Given the limitation of mobility, health challenges, and overall personnel deployment at the height of the covid-19 pandemic, the Project finds itself performing a relevant data collection activity of attempting to document CSO situation, challenges, and responses during the time of covid-19, through the short-term Project.

Furthermore, it was explained that a key concern for the project the “need to survey and monitor how these policies and measures are being disseminated and implemented to see the issues and challenge towards developing appropriate, effective and meaningful responses and action points”. Moving forward with key recommendations based on the situational analysis indeed was a major project output.

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## *Coherence*

On p. 10 of the Project Concept, it was also stated that the Project “...aims to contribute to the continued response to COVID-19 and other needs for basic services by equipping civil society groups with knowledge and support systems that will help protect them against repressive measures invoked by the emergency and anti-terror laws listed above”. When asked concretely and to describe further what the Project actually did and the information it was contributed for CSOs, the PHILSSA National Coordinator’s as project leader explained that they opted to have a longer discussion of the Philippine context and a succinct presentation of over-all project aim with some details and particularization. When asked why details were missing in the Final Report, the evaluator was told the Project Team “intended to synchronize these details/ particularization with the objectives stated in the Proposal, but forgot to do so after the constant revisions and finetuning by several persons.”

Furthermore, it was also pointed out by the Project leader that, “the data in the final report is mainly on the implementation of project strategies, engagement with target groups and achievement of the expected results. We had to prioritize what needed to be published (especially for community leaders and those in areas with problems in connectivity) and what can be shared online.

To verify the actual objectives adopted by the Project, below was the adjustment, as intimated to the evaluator:

Concept Paper:

1. To disseminate to civil society organizations (CSOs) the government Covid-19 emergency response policies and guidelines, Covid-19 data and trends, and other related government policies and guidelines for civil society organizations
2. To monitor and document effect on civil society organizations of these government policies and guidelines and of the Covid-19 pandemic in general
3. To provide technical and legal assistance to civil society organizations in dealing with the effects of these government policies and guidelines and of the Covid-19 pandemic in general
4. To use documentation of rights restrictions and violations to advocate to lawmakers, local executives, and the general public on the need to protect human rights, including civic space, even in times of emergency like the Covid-19 pandemic

But this was revised together with the strategies and expected results after consultations and planning in Oct 2020 - Jan 2021:

1. To study the effect on civil society organizations and civic space of Covid-19 pandemic and the government response policies/ programs
2. To disseminate to civil society organizations (CSOs) needed primary information for the protection and promotion of CSOs and civic space in the time of the pandemic

3. To continue to monitor and document the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and government policies/ programs on CSOs and civic space and to provide further legal guidance materials/ mechanism to CSOs in addressing these effects
4. To use the documentation of rights restrictions and violations to advocate to lawmakers, local executives, and the general public on the need to protect and promote civic space during the Covid-19 pandemic and address its effects on CSOs.

Examining the adjusted expected results above, suffice it is to say that the Project achieved coherence in its objectives and goals viz its achievements as the Project has achieved nos. 1 and 2. Overall the results for nos. 1 and 2 objectives are aligned with the ultimate aim of the Project, which is to document CSOs' situation during the time of covid-19 and to be able to collect information to assist them with their basic needs especially in terms of protecting civic space. No. 3 is partly achieved with the information materials produced and needs to be seen more (monitoring activities) in the following days and months, while no. 4 (advocacy to lawmakers) remains to be seen. Laudable as they are, nos. 3 and 4 need to be further explored and should be pursued as continuing advocacies for the CSO sector, especially as offices, especially public agencies have started holding more regular face-to-face work.

### *Effectiveness*

Enumerating the achievement of expected results, as validated with the Project leader, the following are listed viz-a-vis the Project Objectives:

1. To study the effect on civil society organizations and civic space of Covid-19 pandemic and the government response policies/ programs
  - Data on the effects on effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and government response policies/ programs on CSOs and civic space
  - Deepening and discussion on issues and concerns on the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the government response policies/ programs on CSOs and civic space
2. To disseminate to civil society organizations (CSOs) needed primary information for the protection and promotion of CSOs and civic space in the time of the pandemic
  - Infographics/ popular materials on protecting and promoting civic space in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic
3. To continue to monitor and document the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and government policies/ programs on CSOs and civic space and to provide further legal guidance materials/ mechanism to CSOs in addressing these effects

- Coordination mechanisms and activities within PHILSSA, CODE-NGO and AKKMA to monitor and document effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and relevant government policies/ programs
  - Development of materials/ mechanism for needed legal advice/ assistance
  - Dissemination of the materials/ mechanism developed
4. To use the documentation of rights restrictions and violations to advocate to lawmakers, local executives, and the general public on the need to protect and promote civic space during the Covid-19 pandemic and address its effects on CSOs
- Engagement with lawmakers, local executives and other stakeholders

### *Efficiency*

Project funding from CISU is 99.907 DKK or around 699,347 PHP. Of the project funding, PHILSSA received 607,878.32. With a relatively small amount, the Project was able to accomplish much, in terms of human resources mobilized, while accomplishing data collection virtually. The project conducted primary and secondary researches, developed knowledge products and social media materials (including 2 primers in English and Tagalog and the research output), organized online fora, and provide support to 8 local orgs for Covid response and org strengthening activities.

Aside the funding from CISU accessed with DIB, PHILSSA mobilized other resources for the project. In addition, PHILSSA provided the other staff members to lead and support the project and other office and administrative costs.

PHILSSA also mobilized partners, CODE-NGO and AKKMA, on project activities such as research, advocacy and coordination work.

Thus, the Project achieved efficiency in carrying out the study, as it mobilized and utilized needed resources to deliver its targets and results in a way that is economic yet timely.

Given the size and short duration of the project, this might not be much, but the future efforts may build on what the project has started to strategically address threats to civic space and strengthen the institutional capacities and resilience of CSOs.

The evaluator's general comments are:

1. Government policies on managing Covid-19 were documented and described sufficiently.
2. Technical as well as legal advice to organizations appear to have been extensive, as can be deciphered from the Report, although these need to be laid out and explained more in detail, in terms of strategies, perhaps like road maps, protocols, etc.

3. Conduct of actual Advocacy work was not clear, as it appears that full advocacy work still needs to be done. To cite a highlight from the Report on what can be done (p.18):

- ii. “Clarify community and organizational agenda of issues and concerns that CSOs and community groups could work on together and plan communal advocacy actions on these issues and concerns.”

Upon discussion with the Project leader, here’s what the evaluator confirmed:

“The final implementation report provides an overview of the activities implemented. Key knowledge products have also been shared. Many materials were shared as social media cards in PHILSSA FB page and in the website (now being updated)

Similar to the findings under Coherence above, achievement especially of nos. 1-3 objectives have rendered the Project’s Effectiveness. Nos. 3 and 4 have to be continuing major pursuits, if the Project has to have continuing and sustained future relevance.

### *Sustainability*

Network of existing partners is clearly vast and wide.

A commitment regarding future roles and responsibilities, not just monitoring nodes/focal points may need to be forged, such as through Memorandum of Agreements, etc.

### *Strengths of the Project*

To be sure, the Project has sustained the needed warm bodies and network of CSO Stakeholders and representatives of communities that have presumably been distressed during the onslaught of the pandemic. These network will hopefully engender sustainability of the continuing effort to guard civil society against a shrinking civic space claimed in the Project Report. The Project claims *increased awareness on civic space, incipient coordination and support mechanisms as strengths* that are important pillars for the Project’s sustainability.

### *Risks/Constraints*

Given the health hazards and risks posed by the covid-19 pandemic, the Project experienced major challenges as virtual means of data collection surely had limitations, which may have affected the limited data and information gathered by the Project. Nevertheless, it has accomplished major outputs as can be gleaned above.

Because of the quarantine protocols and operational challenges, some activities needed more time for preparations, coordination and implementation, such as the inception activities. For example, it was revealed that it took more time to implement the activities with AKKMA due to technical capacity and connectivity issues.

Overall, project duration was hampered -- originally it was due for completion within eight months (Oct 1, 2020 – Jun 30, 2021), but it extended to Sep 30, 2021.

### *Pluses/Gains and Benefits of the Project*

As stated in the Proposal (p.6):

“They will benefit largely with information on the Covid-19 pandemic and the government policies and guidelines on addressing this and related to civil society organizations, as well as with technical and legal advice/assistance in addressing identified challenges and needs, and in sustaining their organizations and operations.”

There are exceptional gains that may be added:

- The knowledge products and dissemination/ advocacy activities contributed to increased awareness among CSOs on civic space and the threats to it.
- Working with CODE-NGO and AKKMA, PHILSSA had initiated an incipient national backbone coordination mechanism for dissemination and awareness-raising, monitoring and documentation, and quick response action in protecting and promoting civic space, which has also been already pointed out above.

These are initial gains that need to be nurtured, strengthened and expanded.

### **Overall findings/ assessment by the evaluator:**

The list of challenges, lessons and ways forward are listed succinctly in the Final Report. These show the **Relevance** of the Project.

However, the more important and substantive items, such as the **Deepening Socio-Economic Impacts, especially for Poor and Vulnerable Families**; the **Intensifying Civic Space Threats**, as well as the **Deepening Socio-Economic Impacts, especially for Poor and Vulnerable Families** would have provided the core story for the Project. There should have been more focus on these findings in terms of nuances and more data and information, such as clear indicators of the challenges and threats along these areas. These could be the subject of future and continuing study.

### **Recommendations:**

1. In the given Intervention Proposal, the scope and limitations of the “project” are not very clear. There may need to be short-term and long-term narratives based on goals and aims of research and advocacy work. For instance, is it the experience of CSOS during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic or is it the experience of CSOs on human rights violation given the government policies that will be given focus? Both can be further documented and expanded in terms of data collection in more CSOs

as well as documentation of overall description of the civic space available for CSOs to function more fully as they should within the society.

2. Further assessment whether available information materials were sufficient for CSOs to function well / cope with the difficulties faced during the pandemic may also be further investigated, especially to determine information asymmetry.

3. It would be good to compile more case studies on the effects of the pandemic and government policies on the life of CSO as organizations as well as their staff, such as actual number of staff laid off or reduced; specific programs that were stopped; actual coping mechanisms in office management were presented (with a before and after comparison) for example can be further studied.