

The EU is recognised in Pakistan as a long-standing and trusted partner in development, including on dialogue in relation to civil society space. In recent exchanges, the Ministry of Economic Affairs has expressed interest in EU support in improving the capacity of its NGO Unit which oversees the implementation of the national NGO policy and its registration requirements. The proposed two-stranded approach of technical assistance to the Ministry and strengthening civil society collaboration has the potential of deepening the EU dialogue with the Government on issues of civil society space, as well as strengthening the voice and role of key CSO networks and alliances and improving CSO-Government relations and dialogue.

The action will contribute to the implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan 2021-2025 GAP III, with a focus on its thematic areas of engagement “Promoting equal participation and leadership”.

2.2 Problem Analysis

Short problem analysis:

With an exponential growth of the civil society in Pakistan, questions remain whether this trend can be sustained given the capacity limitations and weaknesses that are bound to inhibit further growth. There are a number of relevant challenges, including poor financial transparency, development partner dependency and more generally weak financial sustainability (particularly for large development-oriented and advocacy organisations, as opposed to Community-Based Organisations (CBOs)⁴), and internal governance and accountability⁵, which afflict the sector and continue to hamper its efforts to provide effective partnerships in the delivery of services, and an effective counterpoise of the state⁶. Other relevant areas where more technical skills need to be developed, as highlighted by the surveyed CSOs⁷, include evidence-based research, policy dialogue and advocacy; communication and storytelling and use of e-tools. Because of weak organisational capacity, CSOs in Pakistan also face significant challenges in accessing funding, particularly from domestic sources, which further limits their ability to implement programmes and sustain their operations. The limited availability of funding also restricts the diversity of CSOs and the range of issues they can address.

On the collective side, CSOs have formed networks and alliances to strengthen their voice as a sector vis-a-vis the government. These networks have a fairly large membership base. However, they are mostly sector-focused and built around specific themes such as humanitarian response, child rights, climate change and food and nutrition etc. As such, their collective voice and power remains limited to the issues and challenges emerging within their programmatic themes. Although CSOs of all networks experience constraints due to the restrictive enabling environment, the networks themselves have made so far limited efforts to come together and speak effectively for the civil society as a whole.

Main challenges hampering cooperation and networking include: (i) lack of funding and competition for funding (particularly with INGOs); (ii) limited trust and mutual understanding (particularly between more traditional vs. modern sections within civil society) ; (iii) lack of co-operation from the government and non-conducive environment (iv) capacity issues such as governance and management gaps; (v) lack of sectoral expertise and skills; (vi) duplication of work and overlapping areas that exhaust resources and; (vii) leadership challenges.

There is still little communication, let alone cooperation, between the large and “politically influential” wing of civil society that draws its strength from religion, and the small but increasingly vocal wing that draws its strength from modern development theories and the rights movement⁸. Improved communication within the sector could help improve public perceptions of CSOs.

On the legal and institutional framework, and despite the recent reforms (see section 2.1. on the revised 2022 NGO Policy), CSOs continue to be governed by a wide array of laws, which are enforced by multiple government

⁴ The widespread public impression that CSOs in the country are heavily dependent on foreign funds holds true for large development-oriented and advocacy organizations, but not all others. While intermediary NGOs have multiple funding sources, CBOs rely mostly on local sources.

⁵ One positive development in terms of the professionalization of the sector was the adoption back in 2007 of a code of conduct by the Pakistan NGO Forum (PNF). Its implementation remains however very limited. See: <https://ngospk.webs.com/code-of-conduct>.

⁶ Civil Society and Social Development in Pakistan. How the State can support its development through effective regulation. Briefing Paper No.101. Democracy Reporting International. December 2019

⁷ Survey launched for the preparation of the EU Roadmap for engagement with CSOs in Pakistan. 2021

⁸ Overview of Civil Society Organizations: Pakistan,” ADB Civil Society Briefs.