

NGOs' struggle between institutional emptiness and informations' manipulation

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During the past few years, also due to the high speed of information flow, we have witnessed worldwide to an increasing wave of allegations and false accusations against civil society organizations and local/international non-governmental organizations. In fact, we are nowadays used to read about unrealistic cases of NGOs and CSOs linked to corruption, lack of transparency, bribery, incompetence as the events in the Mediterranean Sea may show. In this case, the inaction by governments in the face of such heinous crimes makes it difficult to believe in any declaration of "decisive struggle against trafficking, slavery or criminal traffic of migrants", leaving the non-governmental actors alone to face this issue.

Actually, these are just some of the misrepresentations that the current populist rhetoric has been using to attack CSOs and NGOs.

Certainly moved by underlying deeper political intents such as raising consensus, politicians and other stakeholders moved by self-interest have identified NGOs as an easy culprit to target and expose to the hatred of the public opinion which is therefore inclined to identify their contribution to society's development as absent or counterproductive, if not - in some cases - even anti-patriotic. One of the main consequences is that the advocacy role of these organizations at both institutional and grass roots level has been undermined.

In the first case, it is undoubtful that strong civil society is key to a comprehensive and inclusive decision-making process: it is precisely the NGOs and CSOs duty to be the representatives of the civil society and make its voice resonate, lest to be forgotten where and when it really matters. In this context, we often hear about the multi-stakeholder approach. The pluralism of ideas and political opinions is a value, feeds the ability to understand reality by listening to the reasons of others and strengthens democracy and participation. It is hard to think of an effective and participatory system if one of the main stakeholders is continuously silenced and its credibility keeps being undermined by false allegations.

This being the environment in which these organizations operate; how can they present themselves as the legitimate spokespeople of the entire civil society?

On the other hand, at the grassroots level, a weak and allegedly unreliable civil society is easily prone to manipulation and will end up losing its role in the community: that of advocating for the rights of the different people, of bringing the fancy ivory tower from where politicians and stakeholders against it carry out their propaganda closer to the reality where people live and survive every day, with their uniqueness and diversities. Society is not a monolith; on the contrary, it is extremely diversified. It is up to us to embrace it. So,

how can NGOs be able to contribute to the construction of bridges between communities and allow cooperation to be an exchange between societies making them more open and inclusive?

Being in this situation, we ask ourselves: is there any room left for effective advocacy? Not easy to answer.

Either way, it is our duty to find it. How? By acting even more on transparency, showing that there is nothing to hide or escape from: that all financial reports are in line, that donors are satisfied, that those fancy indicators have been duly met. On the other hand, though, people are not numbers or quantities. This is why it is important to respond to the accuses and counterbalance the distorted narrative that many people have been using and many more have come to believe.

No one is perfect, not even the NGOs. But the tension to improve remains high in them by adopting the necessary tools in order to improve their activities so that they are effective and they can build, with comparison, dialogue and partnership, a fairer and more rightful world.

With this in mind, we would like to remember Paolo's words:

«Non ho la velleità di cambiare il mondo, ma quella di cambiare la vita alle persone sicuramente sì»

(I don't desire to change the world, but to change some people's lives)