Concluding remarks and recommendations

Policy Forum on Development (PFD) Global Meeting and 10th Anniversary
September 29, 2023, Brussels (Belgium)

The PFD recommendations are important because they can be instrumental in setting up part of policies that will have an impact on the people. I know a lot of you are here for the first time, but it’s also true that it is not every day you go to a dialogue space like this, talking in the same room with representatives of CSOs and local authorities. The conversation was interesting over the course of a couple of days. We don’t always agree on everything, but we are all united for a common purpose. That is why we came up with something transformative that has an impact and we tagged this conversation a quest for quality.

During this session, we are trying to extract key messages that we’ve been hearing about different aspects such as gender, youth, civic space, inequalities, human rights, urbanization, migration, but also the EU initiatives on Team Europe or Global Gateway.

It is difficult to have a summary of 3-day lively and intense discussions. But we propose to condense the conclusions and recommendations stemming from the discussions in 5 points:

1. We must recognize the complexity of the situation at the national, regional and global levels, and that this complexity is not favorable to opening up civic space across the world. The fundamental pillars of civic space, democracy and good governance do not develop in isolation. These pillars are intertwined and should be addressed, taking into account the context in which civic actors are called upon to exercise their fundamental rights. In such context, adopting a country specific and nonlinear approach is key. We must consider the freedom of association and expression should be considered as a fundamental right protected by the legislation. The enforcement of this legislation is a precondition for civic actors to exercise their fundamental rights, thus addressing structural causes that generate social and political polarization and unrest. Commitment to contribute to protecting human rights, civic space, applying the values of democratic principles should guide the EU negotiations and political dialogue with partner countries. One should however pay particular attention to disruptive impact of regulations and digital surveillance technologies developed with the rationale to counter terrorism, and that remains a concern in strengthening the rule of law and institutional independence.

2. We need to reinforce the enabling environment specific to civic space, enhancing trust at all levels, understanding and acknowledging respect between all actors. This should be a prerequisite to any actions in opening
up civic space and building stronger partnerships, multistakeholder action including with the effective participation of the grassroots communities at local, regional, national levels from across all sectors. Special attention should be given in that regard to people living in informality and to migrants and refugees. Civic space should be open for these people as well. The legislation and regulations should be adapted accordingly.

3. We have heard time and time again the need for greater transparency and inclusion. Transparency is necessary for accountability reasons, drawing from historically proven solutions, anchored in a whole-of-society approach, enhancing structural consulting with stakeholders' local realities. Solidarity needs to be an underlying principle.

4. Ultimately, when we speak about civic space, we are speaking about safe spaces. Underlying causes eroding civic space need to be addressed in order to enable citizens to exercise their rights. All of us need to be better partners and we can leverage to open up the civic space.

5. There is also a need for increased, rapid, and flexible funding to support civil society organizations and civic space.

Women are responsible of feeding the population in many developing countries. We need to put women in any inter-sectorial aspects of inequality. Migration has a human face and women are particularly at risk in this area. With regards to civic space, despite the Maputo protocol, many women cannot exert their human rights. Women should be at the center of EU cooperation. The current economic system considers only remunerated work and does not recognize the work done by women at home despite its centrality in safeguarding the life of their families. There is a need to document this contribution with appropriate data. We need to guarantee women are part of any decision making in the planning and management of local communities and cities, so that the latter can be inclusive. Women should not only be consulted but they also should be in control. We should address gender-based violence in both digital spaces and physical spaces.

We are grateful to the PDF for creating space for young people. If there is one actor to invest in, it’s youth.

Migrants and refugees are significantly being reduced, and they are being criminalized, weaponized and commodified. There is also a shared view that exporting labor has never served to develop any country and should not be seen as a development solution. In fact, migrant workers are only a means to make a profit for the private sector companies and a means to acquire hard currency for the labor exporting countries. Many displacements of labor, including forced displacements due to climate change, are not organized and fall often into the hands of mafias, even if climate change results in more and more displacements. For most migrants and refugees, civic space is not accessible. This is why a call is made to prioritize migrants and refugees’ protection in EU cooperation even though we are aware that the issue can be controversial in European countries.

Inequality is seen as a structural issue, within a given country or between countries.
Central to this situation is the questioning of the global finance architecture, the functioning of the international financial system, and the role of global finance institutions such as IMF and the World Bank. The challenge here is that the international finance system brings about austerity and not prosperity, which in turn nurtures inequalities within and between countries.

The over-reliance on private sector allegedly because of the limitation of public resources is another issue of contention if development means having impact on the improvement of the living conditions of the majority of the people, including the poor. There is a logical dichotomy between betting on the private sector, which engine is profit, to meet the requirements of access of the majority to affordable basic public service, in the context of shrinking fiscal space. What is observed is that privatization generally goes hand in hand with reduction in social spending, including social protection, and reduction of the wage bill, which results in the spread of poverty and inequality.

We should also put into perspective the current developmental paradigm in which there is no environmental limit to borrowing from nature for the needs of economic development, which shows to be wrong on a daily basis. Unsustainable patterns of production and consumption are at the heart of the economic system we are living in. No surprise that younger generations are more and more aware of the need to go towards a more sustainable and more inclusive pathway of development. This implies a paradigm shift that puts at the core the role of the social and solidarity economy.

We need policy flexibility to adapt responses to the needs. Continuous capacity building, highlighting and mainstreaming the role of women, reinforcing social coherence and resilience came out quite strongly, as the best way to fighting inequality and building social justice. We also need to address the financial architecture of the global trading system and global governments that are producing inequalities.

We need more regulation of the private sector to ensure that there is strong accountability and responsible business compacts. But we need also to acknowledge that there are different types of private sectors companies: multinationals, SMEs, cooperatives, informal sector, etc. We need to tailor the partnership with the private sector according to the type of companies we are dealing with. We need to promote what is inclusive and socially owned, just transition and pathways to the Green Economy, which is negotiated with the civil society organizations, the communities, the private sector and the public sector.

We also need to ensure digital justice, and this is about open software and technology access to the Internet, democratization of data governance, and using it to generate policies to fight inequality, but also ensuring the respect of rights including labor rights in the digital economy, and that people are not left behind in access to digital services.
We need to connect the dots between inequalities and the Global Gateway through better inclusion. There are still many unanswered questions with respect to the Global Gateway.

We wish to see CSIs and LAs on the Global Gateway advisory group the same way the private sector is involved in it, and their effective and meaningful participation in the dialogue.