

MAECENATA STIFTUNG

COMMUNIQUÉ

Think7 Summit | 23 - 24 May 2022 | Berlin

Some Comments with Regard to the Role of Civil Society

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Introduction

The G7 is a forum of the seven leading industrialized countries and democracies in the world. The presidency rotates each year. It is Germany's turn in 2022. The climax is the G7 Summit of the heads of state and government which will take place from 26th to 28th June 2022 at Schloss Elmau in Bavaria. To engage with a range of different interest groups, the so-called Engagement Groups, is an integral part of every G7 Presidency. This dialogue has a long tradition. A civil society dialogue and a think-tank dialogue are two out of a total of 7 such engagement groups. The civil society group (C7) presented its findings (communiqué) to Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz on 5th May 2022 (see <https://civil7.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Civil7-Communique-2022-1.pdf>). The think tank group (T7) presented its communiqué to the Chancellor on 24th May 2022 (see https://www.think7.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/20220520_T7_Communique.pdf). This communiqué was prepared by a working group to which 300 representatives of leading international think tanks contributed. The following comments provide a brief analysis of the T7 recommendations from a civil society perspective.

Mentions of Civil Society in the Communiqué

“The agenda-setting flexibility of the G7, combined with significant degrees of freedom for the presidency in developing formats for dialogue and deliberation, makes the G7 an ideal forum for purpose-driven, horizontal approaches to address global challenges, which must also include civil society voices. These approaches may include cross-

¹ The Maecenata Foundation is an independent think tank devoted to the study of and the dissemination of information on civil society, civic engagement, and philanthropy. Its core programme is the Maecenata Institute for Philanthropy and Civil Society, a research and policy centre, founded in 1997, and based in Berlin, Germany. The foundation's scope of study is national, European, and international. For details on projects, publications, and events see www.maecenata.eu.

sectoral working groups and task forces or combined ministerial meetings. The existing engagement groups of the G7 need to have a permanent role across presidencies. This is also true for a multi-stakeholder approach, inviting NGOs, scientists, representatives from civil society and the most vulnerable social groups to a permanent G7 forum. Such a permanent involvement and forum fosters the accountability, consistency and implementation of G7 decisions.”

“Apply multilevel governance, including the particular strengthening of the regional level: large-scale transformation requires a multi-level governance approach as cities and communities are drivers of the transformation. Transitions to net-zero should be achieved through enhancing social justice and undertaking a multi-layer approach that embraces different levels of society: the micro, the macro, the meso and exo levels, with a particular focus on the latter levels relating to the role of citizens, communities, civic organisations, and governmental bodies.”

“Moreover, a “Global Resilience Council”, with state- and non-state actors, may be considered.”

“Explore new pathways to local sustainable prosperity: As liberal democracies, the G7 countries are characterized by active citizen participation and engagement. This can be leveraged to implement initiatives of citizen-led prosperity measurement in order to create pathways and frameworks for sustainable prosperity in different locales, improving social solidarity and social cohesion.”

Comments

- (1) It is certainly an improvement over older policy papers provided by think tanks at supranational level that civil society and related terms (citizen participation, non-state actors, civic organisations, NGOs) are mentioned at all.
- (2) However, the paper retains a strictly state-orientated view-point, as may be seen in the following quotation: “The G7 must firmly acknowledge that an effective response to these threats can only be found in an inclusive, rules- and values-based international order, supported by permanent international institutions that recognize universal human rights and the sovereignty of nation-states, along with regional bodies and agreements consonant with this approach.” Here, there is no mention of civil society, nor of the business sector for that matter. This, as has been universally acknowledged, is out of step with the development of global public governance in the 21st century.

- (3) The underlying normative theory behind the communiqué is that governments alone are called upon and able to direct, supervise and execute all measures suggested. The paper does not take into account that development, social change and policy shaping processes in the 21st century need to be coordinated between a number of players of whom the government is one, and both the business sector and the civic space to include civil society are certainly others.
- (4) Wherever the paper deals with civil society and related terms, the wording is unspecific and strangely bloodless. Expertise concerning the role, potential, limitations, and shortcomings of civil society players was evidently not available to its authors and reviewers. With the help of such expertise, civil society involvement could have been described more concisely, and evaluated using state of the art methodology.
- (5) Throughout the paper, the citizens and the communities of choice they create seemingly remain objects of rule as they were in the traditional Hegelian concept of an overarching position of the state; i.e. they may be heard on occasion and at the rulers' whim (and exercise their periodic right to vote), but there is no suggestion of an institutionalized and permanent interplay. They are not recognized as partners. In this context, it is worth remembering Art . 11 (2) of the Treaty on European Union that reads: "The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society." The communiqué also fails to take into account the United Nations Guidance Note 'Protection and Promotion of Civic Space', issued in September 2020.
- (6) Talking with civil society, i.e. civil society activists and executives (civil society with very few exceptions does not have "representatives") is of course a vital part of the government – civil society interplay. To this end, in this particular case, some interaction between T7 and C7 would have been useful. But this cannot supplant a serious academic and policy debate on the role of civil society in the public sphere. To this end, and given that the involvement of civil society in the public sphere is here to stay, it would seem of essence to involve experts and think tanks that specialize in civil society studies in framing and composing policy papers of the kind and scope of this communiqué.
- (7) Given the crisis and potential erosion of democracy, and the necessity of defending a society based on human and civil rights, the rule of law and democracy, policy papers of the kind and scope of this communiqué should convince governments that a very close partnership between the states and those civil society

organisations that are willing to join in the defence is the only feasible option at their disposal. Governments should not be engaged in shrinking the civic space or crowding civil society out, but in gaining civil society players as active partners on a level playing field, all the more since they have had to accept members of the business sector as partners long ago. They should be conscious of the fact that a vibrant civil society is a prerequisite of a functioning democracy, not vice versa, the fact that civil society activities may seem uncomfortable or disturbing notwithstanding.

- (8) A vibrant civic space to include activism as well as watchdogs, advocacy organisations, service providers, intermediaries, community building organisations and other subsectors of civil society is an asset to an open, pluralist and democratic society, not a liability.

Berlin, 10th June, 2022