



To give credence to the causes that any civil society organization claims to drive it is appropriate that such an organization should prove commitment to achieving its goals and continually develop its approaches to achieving its set objectives.

The Centre for Civil Society, (CCS), is one organization that has upheld a remarkable record of effectively carrying out its goals of influencing people's thinking and championing the causes of the vulnerable from its inception, with a committed spirit and strategic approaches to delivering its causes. From the first day I learnt about the organization (through the Manali Shah, the wife of the founder, who was my colleague working as a volunteer at the GIVE Network), I have taken a keen interest in its activities thereby visiting the centre in New Delhi where I met the team that powers its activities. The first time I met Parth Shah, the president and founder of the CCS, was during his visit to Nigeria. But the time for this interview with Dr. Shah came upon my visit to the centre when I got to know more about the commendable work of the CSS. Here is the story of the CCS journey...

#### Can you tell us about the Centre for Civil Society and your focus activities?

Centre for Civil Society, CCS, is a unique free market think tank that directly champions the causes of street entrepreneurs, poor parents, farmers and tribal peoples. Free market institutes are generally viewed as doing the bidding of corporations and the wealthy. We have consciously chosen issues that clearly demonstrate that the classical liberal approach is beneficial to the poor in urban as well as rural areas. Our 'Livelihood Freedom Campaign' talks about de-licensing and deregulating street entrepreneurs and the 'Terracotta Campaign' successfully lobbied for giving forest land to tribal peoples. The School Choice Campaign advocates school vouchers to break the monopoly of the government on the education of the poor. The classical liberal approach does more for the poor than probably any other philosophy; we just need to find issues to drive home that message effectively.

#### Championing the causes of the vulnerable, there must be a significant factor that led to embarking on such a remarkable cause. What will the story behind the establishment of CCS be?

When I returned to India after my studies in the USA, I found out that rent control and tenancy laws make it nearly impossible to lease any space without close personal contacts. Proprietors not only receive (legal) rents below market rates, but are also in constant danger of losing the property to their tenants. I was fortunate in finding a well-wisher with an apartment with a telephone and gas for cooking. Yes, cooking gas is also a government

## Centre for Civil Society: PROVIDING GUIDANCE to THE YOUTH

By Adenike Fagade-Arighababu

monopoly in India. Economically rational laws and the sanctity of contracts were no longer mantras to be recited at classical liberal gatherings. Widespread abuse of political power, close ties between politicians and criminals, flagrant violation of even basic human rights, censorship of books, plays, films and works of art vividly demonstrated the government's control over not just the economic but also the social and cultural life of India. After her political independence from an alien state, India awaits her civil independence. It was to signify the necessity of economic, social and cultural freedom from the omnipresent Indian state that the Centre for Civil Society (CCS) was inaugurated on 15 August 1997, the 50th anniversary of India's political independence.

#### No doubt the journey couldn't have been all smooth especially when influencing government policies are concerned. How would you describe the journey into pioneering CCS; the challenges and inspiration?

Initially, I wanted to start the think tank soon after I completed my PhD at Auburn University. I visited India in the late 1980s and met a large



Parth Shah, the president and founder of the CCS,

**I spent over ten years of graduate studies and teaching economics in the United States of America. I returned to India in August 1997 and I realized that the Indian people were not able to fulfill their potential not because there was something inherently wrong with them, but the larger economic, social and political system was not allowing them to do so.**

number of people, but the level of support was lukewarm. I realized that I needed to learn the tools of the think tank trade and, more importantly, save enough money to support my personal expenses for at least three years. It seemed possible to raise some money to support the work of the institute, but almost impossible to get support for myself. In India, only the wealthy are expected to engage in such 'social work', and even the law looks harshly on founders of non-profits who draw a salary from the organization. While studying economics at Auburn University, I learned a great deal, first hand, by working at the Mises Institute on the campus. Later, while teaching at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, I was fortunate enough to be able to attend several excellent workshops hosted by the Atlas

Economic Research Foundation, and I was inspired by Leonard Liggio and Alex Chafuen. I was also encouraged by the network of like-minded people across the world and by the work of various institutes. I know that I was lucky. Sometimes the best way to learn to swim is just to dive in. As much as possible, however, one must plan, build relationships and learn the tools of the trade. While a spur-of-the-moment launch of an institute makes for a great story, it is not the best recipe for success.

I capture here a few more observations and thoughts as I look back at the thirteen-year journey of CCS; it has indeed been a delightful and rewarding journey. Fortunately for me, I met my wife, Mana, through this work, and she is an even more uncompromising, enthusiastic and energetic champion of liberalism, pushing me as well as helping me to dream bigger and aim higher. Though I say this as a personal account, Mana and my former and current team members are all integral to and responsible for the achievements of CCS

#### You were in Nigeria sometime during your wife's work as a volunteer with the Civil Society Network for Volunteering Development. As a recommendation for non-profits in Nigeria, describe CCS's approaches toward achieving its set objectives?

Non-profits can have different approaches—one that considers the type of activities or mode of actions undertaken by the institute. I can identify five basic activities: research, advocacy, campaigns, pilots and policymaking/ writing. Research (along with writing and education) could be original or applied. Advocacy is not just passive dissemination but, rather, it takes the message actively, regularly and consistently to a target audience that generally includes politicians and policymakers, but could also consist of students, young scholars, lawyers, judges and non-governmental organization (NGO) activists. Campaigning involves bringing together a large number of affected citizens on a given issue and building a grassroots pressure group to implement change. Pilot projects take the policy idea a step farther by running actual experimental projects to demonstrate the feasibility of the idea and to generate statistical evidence in its favour. The last approach, policymaking, refers to drafting and implementing policy reforms by positioning oneself close to those in power. This could include building capacity within the government to undertake these tasks. Over the years, CCS itself has traversed these five approaches. Initially, we did research and advocacy through publications, policy dialogues, policy meetings for Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), and student seminars and research internships.

*This interview continues next edition...*

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