

Civil Society Partnerships and Development Policies: Emerging Trends

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1. Introduction

Civil society partnerships are not new. What has changed since the early 1990s is their expanding numbers and the growing recognition of the important roles that civil society partners play in social and economic development processes, from drawing attention to problems, assisting in the formation of new strategies and providing direct services, to serving as watchdogs ensuring government fulfillment of commitments. The magnitude of their contribution, particularly in developing countries, is sizeable. Some studies estimate that by the late 1990s, 15-20% of all aid to developing countries (\$6 billion) was being channelled through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – the majority of it for development projects and programmes.¹ According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) estimates, the number of people worldwide ‘touched’ by NGOs alone is more than 250 million.² Pressure is growing to find ways to realize this potential by increasing opportunities for civil society participation at all levels.³

Historically, civil society partnerships, particularly with the United Nations and other inter-governmental organizations, were limited to NGOs working for improvement in areas such as education, health, and human rights. Today, these partnerships have expanded beyond established NGOs to cover other non-State actors such as cooperatives, trade unions, service organizations, community-based organizations, indigenous peoples' organizations, academic institutions, policy and research networks, faith-based organizations, parliamentarians, city and local authorities, even the business sector.

Also recognized as contemporary civil society organizations (CSOs) are informal groups organized with a specific focus, for instance, action groups who come together to lobby local government on a particular issue or take community action, such as people living in the same street organising to keep their environment clean. Such groups are more flexible than formal NGOs, and appear and disappear in reaction to immediate circumstances.

While there is no accurate count of the number of such groups worldwide, to give a small idea, one estimate in 2000 suggested that 100,000 civil society groups had emerged in Eastern Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall and over 1,000,000 NGOs were operating in India alone.⁴

¹“The Impact of NGO Development Projects.” *Overseas Development Institute*. Briefing Paper 2/96, 1996. <http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/briefing/2_96.html>

²Ghaus-Pasha Aisha. “*Role Of Civil Society Organizations In Governance*”. 6th Global Forum on Reinventing Government Towards Participatory and Transparent Governance, 24 - 27 May 2005, Seoul, Republic of Korea. <<http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan019594.pdf>>, p. 4.

³“UN World Summits and Civil Society Engagement.” *United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)*. Research and Policy Brief No. 6, January 2007, p. 1. <[http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/\(httpPublications\)/91736EC5914F9B2FC1257280002FF5A6?OpenDocument](http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/(httpPublications)/91736EC5914F9B2FC1257280002FF5A6?OpenDocument)>

⁴Brown, L. David David, Khagram, Sanjeev, Moore, Mark H. and Frumkin, Peter. “Globalization, NGOs and Multi-Sectoral Relations.” *Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations and the Kennedy School of Government Harvard University*. Working Paper No. 1. July 2000, p.12. <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/PDF_XLS/workingpapers/workingpaper_1.pdf>

2. Civil society and democratic governance

Since the 1990s there has been growing international consensus that sustainable human development and good governance are indivisible⁵ and that civil society is a key component in their realization. Civil society partnerships are now playing an increasingly visible and effective role in promoting good governance.

In its 2002 Human Development report, the United Nations called for “*a vibrant civil society, able to monitor government and private business - and provide alternative forms of political participation.*” This concept of good governance is based on⁶:

- respect for people’s human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- a say for people in decisions that affect their lives;
- the ability of people to hold decision-makers accountable;
- inclusive and fair rules, institutions and practices that govern social interaction;
- the right of women to be equal partners with men in private and public spheres of life and decision-making;
- freedom for all people from discrimination based on race, ethnicity, class, gender or any other attribute;
- consideration of the needs of future generations to be reflected in current policies;
- economic and social policies that are responsive to people’s needs and aspirations; and
- economic and social policies aimed at eradicating poverty and expanding the choices that all people have in their lives.⁷

This is a very challenging and difficult vision - difficult in the sense that the conditions under which citizen-government relations operate differ for the countries of the world, and are very much defined by their political histories. In the view of western democracies, development is directly linked to practices of good governance. The promotion of democracy as a political system is generally considered the cornerstone of development policies and programmes. This view is, however, disputed in other, mostly non-western countries where this is even considered as interference in the political autonomy of states. As such, democratic values of citizen participation in public life may be difficult to align with the prevailing political belief systems of many countries.

Democracy requires active and committed citizens who not only work for their individual interests and needs, but also for the common good and the needs and interests of the communities in which they live. In Central and Eastern Europe we have seen the powerful influence of NGOs and community groups on the political discourse in the first years after the fall of the communist regimes. National Helsinki Committees put citizen’s rights on the agenda and environmental organisations fought against environmental pollution. These groups were instrumental in forming a strong civil society.

The increasing importance of civil society in governance at all levels has also been seen in the emerging democratic structures of developing countries. Nigeria is a

⁵“Good governance - and sustainable human development.” *United Nations Development Programme*. UNDP Policy Document. January 1997. <<http://mirror.undp.org/magnet/policy/chapter1.htm>>

⁶ Human Development Report 2002: Deepening democracy in a fragmented world. *United Nations Development Programme*, 2002, p. 4. <<http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2002/en/>>

⁷Human Development Report 2002. p. 51.

case in point. Since the advent of democracy in that country in 1999, civil society has grown tremendously and contributed significantly to the identification of human rights abuses and efforts to address health problems such as HIV/AIDS and malaria. In 2007, CSOs were even invited to take an active part in the effective running and oversight of general elections. This type of appeal can only come in an atmosphere of trust.

3. Participation in governance at the international level

The increasing role and prevalence of international governance institutions, particularly in the context of the United Nations system and other multi-lateral institutional structures, have created new fora in which civil society actors are able to influence policy on a global scale.

The UN and its specialized agencies, among them UNESCO, are working to meet the challenges of civil society participation at the international level by striving to define 'global civil society' and to develop the necessary infrastructure to create opportunities for its effective participation. The challenges are immense given the thousands of new actors seeking to influence international bodies on an increasingly wider range of issues.⁸ With the growing number of accredited NGOs and other civil society partners, opportunities for direct intervention by individual organizations through the limited traditional accreditation mechanisms are increasingly strained. Also of concern are the growing questions of legitimacy and balance in formal consultative status in view of the over representation of Northern civil society groups as opposed to those from the South. By one count, only 251 of the 1550 NGOs associated with the UN Department of Public Information were from developing countries⁹.

Since the 1990s UN summits and the resulting action plans have offered wider opportunities for CSOs to lobby delegates and the media in support of their ideas and projects, and to adapt summit themes as an integral part of their own work. There has also been scope for civil society actors to advance proposals and to help implement and monitor summit agendas.¹⁰

But what do such opportunities for civil society engagement really mean? Only a small percentage of the CSOs have access to the main event. For instance, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002) only 8,096 individuals from 925 CSOs were involved in the official activities, while 25,000 participated in the parallel forums.¹¹ Studies by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) show that UN summits and related processes can have highly positive-but not always sustainable-impacts on civil society structure, networking and advocacy in countries that have hosted such events. Maintaining long-

⁸ "Practicalities of Participatory Democracy with International Institutions: Attitudinal, Quantitative and Qualitative Challenges." Laetus in praesens. November 2003.

<<http://www.laetusinpraesens.org/docs00s/demopart.php>>

⁹ Green, Jessica F. Engaging the Disenfranchised: Countries and Civil Society in International Governance for Sustainable Development – An Agenda for Research. United Nations University Institute of Advanced Studies UNU/IAS

<<http://www.ias.unu.edu/binaries/UNU/IAS/DisenfranchisedReport.pdf>>

¹⁰ "UN World Summits and Civil Society Engagement." p. 1.

¹¹ "UN World Summits and Civil Society Engagement." p. 2.

term linkages in the follow-up to summits has often proved difficult because of weak financial bases and rigid national institutional structures.¹²

Attention is shifting to finding new strategies for building partnerships between governments, the business sector and civil society that will move beyond the traditional consultation and lobbying to multi-stakeholder dialogue and involvement of civil society in the planning process at all stages. The importance of civil society involvement at the national level, including NGOs, is a key element in the response of the UN Secretary General to the report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations-Civil Society Relations, convened in 2003.¹³

UNESCO was one of the first of the international organizations to recognize the importance of civil society involvement in global problem solving in areas such as education reform, and to look for ways to broaden citizen participation at every level¹⁴. The UNESCO Collective Consultation of NGOs on Education for All is successively encouraging cooperation of all stakeholders in the implementation of the Dakar goals. For example, during the Conference of the Ministers of Education of African Member States – MINEDAF VIII in Dar-es-Salaam in 2002, civil society organizations participated in the debates and were present on all panels.¹⁵

Participation of civil society is also being addressed at the regional level. In 2000, the European Union (EU) adopted the European Social Agenda. The Social Agenda calls on member states to develop social policies and action plans that focus on anti-discrimination, the integration of marginalized groups, the improvement of quality at the workplace, and partnerships with civil society. It promotes an inclusive concept of community development that seeks to empower marginalized citizens trying to change their situation and emphasizes the role of collective action and civil society partnerships. In the development of economic and physical infrastructure in towns and regions, social policy should focus on the prevention of and solutions for social problems, and create conditions that enable people to fully participate, politically and socially, in society.¹⁶

The challenge of enabling civil society participation is not merely one for the United Nations system and governments alone. International NGOs must also shift from their current emphasis on international advocacy to an approach that links the international, national and local levels. This shift requires new approaches, with viable, horizontal networking at all levels.¹⁷ Mentoring, both within organizations and between newer and more experienced organizations, is imperative. There is also a

¹²“UN World Summits and Civil Society Engagement.” p. 5.

¹³ Annan, Kofi. “Report of the Secretary-General in response to the report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations-Civil Society Relations”. Presented at the 59th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, Document Number A/59/354, New York, September 2003. <<http://www.un-ngls.org/edited%20advance%20report%20of%20SG%20on%20Cardoso.pdf>>

¹⁴ Kearney, Mary-Louise. “Effectiveness in Driving Educational Reform: The Role of International Organizations - The Case of UNESCO: Mobilizing Civil Society Stakeholders”. Paper presented at Ministerial Round Table entitled On Quality Education, 32nd Session of the General Conference of UNESCO, Paris, 3-4 October 2003.

¹⁵ “UNESCO and MINEDAF.” *UNESCO*. <http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=10247&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html>

¹⁶ Touwen, Anne. *Community Empowerment: an approach for Social Inclusion with a special focus on Gender*, to be published in reader for Department of Social Work, Comenius University, Bratislava, August 2007.

¹⁷ Edwards, Michael. “Civil Society and Global Governance.” Paper presented at the conference On the Threshold: The United Nations and Global Governance in the New Millennium, Tokyo, January 2000, p. 8. <<http://www.unu.edu/millennium/edwards.pdf>>

growing need for coordinated action, as insistence on individual issues may prove counterproductive to the larger problems faced by some countries.

4. Participation in governance at the local level

There is a long distance between the globally accepted Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and fulfilling the actual needs of the beneficiaries of these goals at the local level. The primary focus has been on translating global goals to the national level. However, the role of decentralized government, civil society, communities and the private sector must not be ignored.¹⁸

An interesting development is occurring in Rwanda, where the Ministry of Local Government has introduced legislation to encourage joint action forums at both district and sector levels. This is a strategy developed to improve responsiveness and accountability, both essential for the good governance necessary for poverty reduction and economic development, key aspects of the MDGs, Rwanda's Vision 2020 and its Economic Development Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Put simply, joint action is about promoting partnerships between local governments, the private sector and civil society to plan, implement and review development programmes and projects. Decentralized cooperation at the level of government closest to the people encourages promotion of partnerships among local actors and reduces duplication of effort. Common development objectives are sought through participatory decision-making, planning, execution and evaluation. A strong state is a precondition of joint action. National frameworks provide arrangements and networks to support, coordinate, strengthen and assist local actors.

Local government bring together the development partners working at local level: the private sector, INGOs, NGOs, CSOs, faith-based organisations, parent/teacher committees, etc. to agree on the basic goals, objectives and strategies for a district development plan. Once broad consensus is reached around the goals and objectives of each strategy, and they are clear, a management committee develops an agenda for action to provide a basic framework for organisations wishing to participate. Regular reporting that provides both positive and critical feedback is expected and annual meetings review any necessary changes. The adoption of a capacity development approach is a precondition to success.

5. Capacity building – a key to successful partnerships

Poverty and sustainable development cannot be addressed through technical and economic solutions alone. The human factor is important, as is the development of social capital. If countries are to provide environments in which people can develop their full potential, ordinary citizens must be able to participate in and influence the decision-making processes. Good governance is the result of cooperation and partnerships between government and civil society and will not succeed where

¹⁸SNV Netherlands Development Organisation, East and Southern Africa Region, Towards MDG Localization in Africa: options and experiences, Kenya, 2006. >

authorities at local, regional and national level do not invest in building partnerships with civil society.

With the dramatic increase in the number of civil society organizations across the globe, one might assume that better representation would follow automatically. This unfortunately, is not always the case. As the role of civil society, and NGOs in particular, varies from country to country, so does their effectiveness as a third sector next to government and the private or business sector. Some organizations, especially the newer NGOs, often lack the requisite qualifications and experience necessary to play an effective role. Many lack the necessary financial and legal resources. Some operate within rigid governmental or administrative structures that offer little opportunity for civil society participation. In other cases, for example in the countries in transition (Central and Eastern Europe), now already more than 15 years on the track from communist rule to democracy, one is still confronted by citizens' passivity in participating in democratic processes and their reluctance to do voluntary work. The development of informal civil society groups presupposes that people know how to organise themselves, how and where to get the financial means for their activities and how to cooperate with local authorities.

Building partnerships between stakeholders to facilitate civil society's influence in social planning and decision-making at the local and regional level is essential. Citizens are more likely to participate in civil society advocacy and lobbying efforts when it becomes clear that they can influence decision-making about issues that concern their daily lives and their living environment. Good governance requires measures to be taken: making institutions and rules more effective, promoting transparency and accountability and building partnerships between the three sectors (government, business and civil society). Public services need to develop client-friendly approaches and public decision-making grounded in the consultation of CSOs, while citizens have to learn that their voices can make a difference. This is not always easy.

Education is a key component of social capital and capacity building. One of the principles of adult education is the realisation that people learn from experience and reflection, and in doing so can be encouraged to take part in participatory democracy.

Capacity building is the process through which a society (or organization) changes its rules, institutions and standard of behaviour, increases its level of social capital and enhances its ability to respond, adapt and exert discipline on itself. It is an essential component of all development policies built upon civil society partnerships. Capacity building training in leadership, advocacy, lobbying, political education of citizens, community development methodologies and other skills all contribute to more transparent and democratic governance.

Capacity building for civil society development has been supported by international donor agencies for many years. One example is the MATRA programme for Central and Eastern European countries funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the organisational strengthening of judges' associations in Slovakia and the Czech Republic and a project to increase the participation of women in public life and politics. The projects offered training in strategic planning, media relations, democratic leadership, training of trainers, advocacy and lobbying, and other skills that are essential for effective civil society organisations. The impact of such projects is wider than on the groups concerned, because the skills learned can often be applied to other contexts.

Capacity building must flow both ways. When it focuses only on civil society, frustration and resistance on the part of governments may be the result. Too often

citizen's actions are seen as a threat instead of an opportunity to improve services and decision-making. This paradox was one of the prime reasons for the drafting of *The European Charter of Active Citizenship*, an attempt to define the rights of citizen groups in the European Union to participation and consultation, including the right of access to information and monitoring.¹⁹ The Charter goes on to define the obligations of public institutions, which is an issue in all former communist countries.

Capacity building is needed for governments and institutions as well as for civil society. Government personnel, for instance, need to learn to behave in a client-friendly way in providing social services and in municipal offices, and to provide citizens with proper information on procedures and municipal/regional plans. Efforts to build good governance in a country should be based on a systems approach in which society is seen as a multilevel, holistic and interrelated system, in which each part is linked to the others.²⁰ Having professional community workers to support the process of citizen activism would help. The integration of a curriculum addressing community development work in schools of social work would be a step toward providing a friendly environment.

6. Other trends

Lack of funding is a major constraint to the development of an effective civil society, especially in CEE and developing countries. The rapid expansion in the number of CSOs has increased the number of stakeholders competing within countries for limited development resources. Government budgets in many countries do not provide sufficient support for civil society activities. This makes it difficult for many organisations to survive. CSOs that are better organized and have stronger links to government and international organizations are generally more successful in competing for the limited resources. This can result in isolated targeting of problems which are common to a wider community or region. For example, CSOs in southern Nigeria were surprised and disappointed when a large grant from an international donor for girls' education targeted only the Northern part of the country, despite the fact that similar problems were present throughout Nigeria. Better coordination and networking are needed if scarce resources are to be distributed effectively.

Traditionally, women played key roles within many NGOs and were major players, particularly at the international level. With the growing prominence of other CSOs, in which often men are more active, there is a risk that the expertise and knowledge women have built up over time will be marginalized. With the transition from NGO to wider CSO participation, it is more important than ever that gender equality and women's empowerment remain priorities.

As NGOs and other CSOs work more closely with governments, questions of neutrality and credibility are being raised. This emerging issue is of particular concern for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and other agencies providing

¹⁹ "European Charter of Active Citizenship." *FONDACA*. July 2006.

<<http://www.fondaca.org/english/documents/EuropeanCharterofActiveCitizenship%20FINAL.pdf>>
<<http://www.fondaca.org/english/documents/EuropeanCharterofActiveCitizenship%20FINAL.pdf>>

²⁰ Bolger, Joe. "Capacity Development: What, Why and How." *Canadian International Development Agency*. Occasional Series, Vol. 1, No. 1, May 2000. <[http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/INET/IMAGES.NSF/vLUIImages/CapacityDevelopment/\\$file/CapDevOSVol1No1-E.pdf](http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/INET/IMAGES.NSF/vLUIImages/CapacityDevelopment/$file/CapDevOSVol1No1-E.pdf)>

emergency assistance in conflict situations. Questions of neutrality are also raised where governments provide large amounts of financial and material resources to humanitarian organizations and other NGOs, and in turn use these to implement their own foreign policy or domestic political agendas.²¹

Another issue is to what extent the proliferation of INGOs providing basic service delivery (water, health, etc) replicates the responsibilities of governments in developing countries, and thereby undermines their obligation to the population. This is particularly an issue, given that many of these INGOs are not particularly democratic institutions, though this may be changing with increased attention to participation of stakeholders.

7. Conclusion

Civil society partnerships have an increasingly important role to play in development efforts. Better integration is needed between international, national and local initiatives. These changes concern not only intergovernmental organizations, but international NGOs as well. If civil society partnerships are to be effective, better infrastructure for ensuring their success needs to be in place. Governments can create the conditions for participative democracy by developing decentralised policy-making with emphasis on local initiatives and by reforming public administration to provide environments less hostile to citizen participation. There is a growing need for professional community workers that help support the participation and engagement of citizens. The integration of a community activism curriculum in schools of social work or adult education is as needed as the political will to create a budget for community work at the local level. NGOs should focus more on partnerships and collaboration within the sector than on the promotion of their own interests, which so often is the case. Greater mentoring and horizontal networking efforts are needed. Last, but not least, governments and civil society should create collective decision-making structures at all levels.

About the Authors:

This paper was prepared by the **International Federation of University Women (IFUW)**, founded in 1919, an international, non-profit organization of women graduates in more than 120 countries working to promote lifelong education, improve the status of women and girls and to enable women to effect positive change for a peaceful, sustainable future. Primary contributors:

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²¹ Akiyama, Nobumasa. "Avoiding a Marriage of Convenience: Some Thoughts on a New Japanese State-NGO Relationship in Humanitarian Relief in Conflict." *Hiroshima Peace Institute*. 2001, p. 5. <http://wwwsoc.nii.ac.jp/psaj/05Print/e_newsletter/2001/akiyama.pdf>

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