

The Role of Civil Society Support in Development Cooperation

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1. Abstract

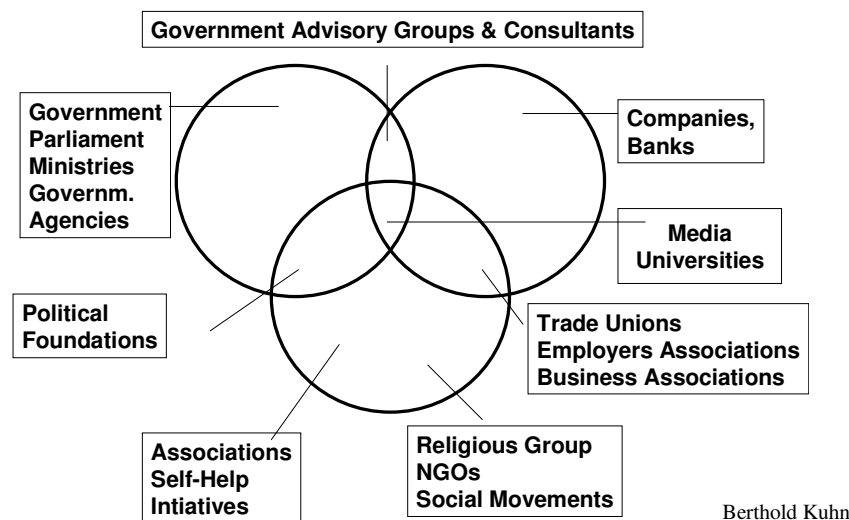
This contribution provides an overview on the landscape of civil society organisations in the field of development cooperation. It focuses on their potential as agents for innovation and social change, on their comparative advantages in providing opportunities for vulnerable groups and minorities and on their typical dilemmas of orientation.

The argument is that previous academic research on NGOs (Jessen 1995, Neubert 1997, Wegner 1997) has not sufficiently highlighted the contribution of development oriented advocacy networks and service providers in bringing about positive changes for politically, economically and/or socially marginalised groups for which the state and the market do not provide opportunities for development. Notwithstanding poor performance of a significant number of NGOs, empirical research in Africa and Asia (Kuhn 2004) provides ample evidence that typical strengths of NGOs consist of engaging in intensive relations with vulnerable groups, awareness raising and agenda setting, adopting an integrated and quality oriented approach to poverty reduction and improving check and balance mechanisms through performing a watch dog role on government and private sector.

2. The Concept of Civil Society

The term civil society offers a wide range of definitions and interpretations and including a variety of actors. This has not jeopardised the popularity of the civil society concept rather it has enlarged the scope of its use. Civil society has a normative and a functional dimension. Normative approaches attribute a set of values such as commitment to non violent forms of action, democratic values and social inclusiveness. Functional approaches (Habermas 1992, 1996) have emphasised the role of civil society as interface of state-society relations and highlighted different functions of civil society in relation to the state, notably the functions of protection of citizens against abuse of state power and the function of dialogue and communication between citizens and the state. CSO escape systematic analysis due the obvious problem to apply theory and systematic analysis to a pool of diverse organisations including advocacy networks, charities, protest and self-help groups as well as lobby organisations.

Development co-operation would be well advised to operate with a workable definition of civil society. The third sector research offers a suitable framework by distinguishing civil society organisations, the third sector, from the first sector (government) and the second sector (private for-profit sector). We may refer to a sphere- or triangle model distinguishing between state, market and civil society by allowing areas of overlapping (e.g. media, Universities, political foundations).



The competition over terms and concepts („Bürgergesellschaft“, Third Sector, Social Capital, Philanthropy, NGOs, NPOs, voluntary organisations, social intermediary organisations, CBOs) has perhaps triggered some confusion but it has also underscored the relevance of the role of non state and non market actors in development co-operation. Civil society seems to have emerged as the concept of widest reference in development research and practice. Critics focusing on the broad nature of the concept and the lack of legitimacy, accountability and transparency of some NGOs, overlook that the nature of the concept of the state is equally broad in nature and problems of legitimacy, accountability and transparency are also relevant to state actors.

3. The Growing Importance of CSO in Development Co-operation

Civil society organisations (CSO) have played an increasingly important role in development co-operation from the 1980s onwards in terms of aid disbursement as well as number and scope of CSO involved in policy dialogue and programme management. A growing number of CSO have made important contributions to the major conferences of the United Nations on development, environmental and human rights issues. Development oriented NGOs have chiefly benefit from more funds for relief, rehabilitation, innovation, training, action research, campaigns and workshops, studies, PRSPs, governance (without government) and human rights. Approximately 15 billion Euro targeted for development support are channelled through humanitarian, development and human rights NGOs. All major donors, including the World Bank, UNDP, EuropeAid and major bilateral donors work extensively with NGOs. The Cotonou Agreements signed by the European Commission and the ACP countries in 2000

provides for 25 percent of total funding support to NGOs. The World Bank reports that civil society involvement in World Bank operations has steadily risen from 21.5 percent of the total number of projects in the financial years 1990 to 41 percent in the financial years 1995 to 71 percent in the financial year 2003. Furthermore, the size and number of development oriented civil society organisation has also increased.

4. Evolution and Trends

Development co-operation of major bilateral and multilateral donors experiences a clear trend from government to government co-operation (until mid-1980s) to involvement of NGOs. While the 1990s may be termed as the golden decade for NGOs when enthusiasm on NGOs was in its high days, more sober attitudes on scope and limits of NGOs have so far prevailed in the decade thereafter.

While the NGO enthusiasts (especially donors in the Anglo-Saxon world) name flexibility, responsiveness, smartness, action research and communication as typical strengths of NGOs, the critics (especially the research community in Germany) pinpointed on problems of legitimacy, representation, accountability and authenticity. However, it seems that the pro-anti camp like mentalities have now given way to more balanced approaches recognising the advantages of working with NGOs but also understanding the limits and typical deficits of NGO co-operation.

5. Types and Landscape of CSO

The landscape of civil society organisations in most countries comprises a variety of different types of organisations. The evidence for the existence of such types/categories is more relevant in some countries than in others. However, even in countries where civil society is still in its infant stage, as for example in Ethiopia, the following categories serve as a kind of framework for slowly constituting civil society. Important types of organisations are:

- Advocacy networks and service providers
- Faith based and non-faith based NGOs
- International and local NGOs
- NGOs, CBOs, SHG
- Trade Unions
- Media
- Universities

The NGO landscape may typically be classified as follows:

- Apex bodies Network bodies
- Sector groups
- Individual NGOs
- Quangos (Quasi NGOs, managed by government or ex-government officials or their dependants)
- Congos (commercial NGOs acting as kind of consulting firms)
- Dongos (heavily donor driven NGOs)
- Pangos (NGOs acting like political parties and aiming at political power)
- Community Based Organisations

- Self Help and User Groups

The pure existence of these types of categories, however, does not give much indication about the performance of the organisations and how well they are grounded in the society. An analysis of NGOs in the Republic of Congo (Kuhn(Particip 2001) shows that there are competing claims by NGOs on the role of apex and network body organisation. The following organisations all attempt to play the role of a kind of focal body, some with less, some with more success.

- Fédération Congolaise des Associations ONG et Fondations du Congo (FECONDE)
- Conseil de Concertation des Organisations de Développement (CCOD)
- Conseil National de Concertation des Organisations Féminines (CNACOF)
- Comité de Liaison des ONG (CLONG)
- de facto: Forum des Jeunes Entreprises de Comafrique (FJEC),

6. Understanding Comparative Advantages of NGOs

The poor performance of some NGOs and the existence of a so called "underworld of NGOs" comprising e.g. violent and fundamentalist action groups shall not undermine the search for innovative non state partners in development co-operation. Many NGOs have demonstrated their ability to mobilise the valuable resources of voluntary work and capital (transfers and donations) in the context of their advocacy work and their provision of social services. They have contributed to the introduction and the expansion of new ethical dimensions in national and international law, e.g. through lobbying for international conventions on banning of landmines and spreading bombs, initiatives against traditional harmful practices and practices of trade and slavery with human beings. Advocacy networks of civil society organisations have managed to put critical topics on the agenda of international conferences and have greatly influenced the work of international organisations, governments and multinational companies on issues such as child labour, social and environmental standards, corruption and debt relief. The concepts of participatory and sustainable development circulated first amongst epistemic communities and NGOs active in development and environment before being incorporated in strategies of international and supranational organisations and national governments. CSO created new opportunities of participation for ethnic minorities and other politically, economically and socially marginalised sections of mainstream society which are excluded from hierarchical forms of political participation, access to market opportunities and social recognition. They created networks and self-help groups and launched awareness raising campaign and projects in different fields of development co-operation, especially concerning children and adult literacy, HIV/Aids awareness and family planning, protection and management of natural resources, micro-finance and income generation, social and legal rights. Many NGOs may have not fulfilled the high expectations of critical research (Neubert 1997) or international organisations, but their work has definitely made a difference and the question today is not if but how CSO should be best involved in development co-operation efforts. We can understand this well when we think about the enormous task of raising awareness and influencing behavioural patterns in the context of combating HIV/Aids. We cannot imagine that government agencies are well placed in reaching out to high-risk groups,

such as prostitutes, homosexuals or promiscuous youngsters who are even criminalised in some countries. This examples makes it clear that we have to take into account the plurality of organisations which are able to mobilise resources in form of voluntary work and donations for the important fight against the spread of the Virus. Lobbying for availability of cheap treatment for patients in poor countries, including shaming on multinational companies, may also be needed by advocacy oriented NGOs. Governments can hardly be seen as coming to the forefront in this matter as their behaviour is (rightly) supposed to be more bounded by international legislation on intellectual property rights.

7. Patterns of Actions and Dilemmas of Orientations

Civil society organisations typically evolve out of a solidarity context, either focusing on solidarity amongst the founding members (member oriented associations) or on solidarity towards third parties (charity oriented associations). Charismatic leadership, voluntary work and private donations are important driving forces in the infant stage of civil society organisations. The rise of NGOs requires strong leadership. Many NGOs are therefor strongly leader and peer group oriented and many appeal to a specific age group. This makes it difficult to sustain their impact over more than one generation. The search for funding requires NGOs to relate to the agenda of donor agencies and to meet the requirements in form of project monitoring and reporting. Given the little experience of most NGOs with sophisticated management systems, this is often a energy and time consuming task and may direct the attention of the NGOs away from action on the cause and with their target groups. Growth of NGOs and dependency of donors bears the high risk to loose identity, flexibility, and access to marginalised groups and the important ability to mobilise voluntary contributions in form of donations, kind and labour.

The danger which lies in partnerships between donor agencies and civil society organisations in development co-operation is the fact that many NGO partners tend to see the co-operation with their donors as an expression of good solidarity while in fact such solidarity is in practice often limited to the implementation of a project agreement. Unlike church based NGOs or some humanitarian NGOs in the North, public donors are unlikely to opt for long lasting relationships with individual NGOs in the South and operate on the basis of a contract culture with focus on time bound and specific objective bound partnership. Their support to individual partners is limited because they want to be seen as open to alternative partners as well. The shift from solidarity to contract culture in the support of NGOs is not sufficiently conceptualised and debated amongst southern and northern NGOs and their public donors.

Striking a balance between professionalism and voluntarism is a difficult challenge for many organisations. This challenge is relevant to all kinds of NGOs, faith based as well as humanitarian NGOs, advocacy networks as well as service providers. In particular many ambitious southern NGOs want to reconcile activities of different nature with each other: spending time with target groups in participatory learning sessions, meeting sophisticated monitoring and reporting demands of donors, showing presence at international conferences and workshops and providing policy inputs in co-operation with the government and business community. Relating to different groups of people requires different expertise and skills and therefore a sound human resource policy.

While politicians and donors, especially public donors, tend to insist that NGOs become more professional, better organised and more predictable in their acting, there is a risk that NGOs lose their comparative advantage to mobilise volunteer work, initiate social movements and reaching out to marginalised sections of society by transforming themselves into outfits of very professional appearance. Those praising the new professionalism amongst NGOs tend to overlook that there are NGOs giving up voluntarism for some sort of quasi professionalism.

Another challenge consists of reconciling an advocacy-oriented approach with a service delivery oriented approach. While NGOs tend to unite in advocacy networks to maximise the impact of their action, they may seek competition in delivering the most innovative services. Advocacy oriented NGOs may easily lose credibility when also engaging in profit making oriented service delivery in the name of so called financial sustainability. There are no easy answers for NGOs but it seems important that NGO leaders engage in a critical debate on such issues so that they can make an informed choice in consultation with members and donors.

Another challenge is to reconcile the local with the global agenda. Some NGOs are better known in the conference centres of the world than in their local neighbourhood. Others operate more as local interest groups and lose the global development perspective. I sometimes have the impression that the busy day-to-day co-operation of NGOs with their donors, governments and fellow NGOs leaves little scope for self-critical reflections on future trends and orientation of their work and their partnerships with others. I hope that my paper contributes to stimulating a debate on critical aspects of NGO orientation and work between advocacy action and service delivery. Thanking you for your kind attention.

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