



Civic Engagement

Introduction

Engaging civil society through civic engagement is seen as increasingly crucial for strengthening people's empowerment. The idea of "civil society"¹ has achieved prominence in political and developmental discourse particularly in connection with democratization in the developing world and a rise of desire for greater participation of people in decision-making at all levels of civil society.

Development practitioners have focused traditionally on the resources and capacities that exist among state agencies, and the potential for voluntary and collective action by citizens themselves has been relatively ignored. Development practitioners are now more interested in informal ties, relationships of trust, cultural and symbolic processes – civic engagements of all kinds and institutions of public life that have been crystallized under the fabric of reciprocal social capital.² There has been further interest in the livelihood ties of local culture and community with greater concerns for more flexible, motivated and decentralized structures with the required skills and responsibility to work in favour of a participatory development.

Concept

UNDP's *Human Development Report 1993* defines civic engagement "as a

process, not an event, that closely involves people in the economic, social, cultural and political processes that affect their lives."³ Experience shows that people participate more effectively if institutions and decision-making processes are located closer to where they live. However, civic engagement may be distinguished from participation per se in that it is specifically associated with efforts to establish channels of voice, representation and accountability at the state level. Civic engagement can play a major role in effecting social mobilization and harnessing of social capital through social experimentation, social innovation and social learning by fostering meaningful partnership between multiple actors engaged in promoting a pattern of development that is participatory and more fulfilling to the ordinary people.

Civic engagement entails several inter-related but distinct processes. These are: people's involvement in decision making; eliciting their contribution to development interventions; and their participation in sharing in the benefits from the development process. Civic engagement therefore helps to promote:

- The growth of community life and capacity of groups to improve their own welfare through political, economic, cultural and moral resources of the state;
- Specific interaction styles which place a premium on flexibility, adaptability, collaborativeness, accountability and

problem solving in relation to key participation opportunities;

- Generation of more accurate and representative information about local needs;
- Diversity of civil society interests and views to ensure that the state is not held captive by a few groups;
- Adoption of interventions in accordance with the needs of the people;
- Mobilization of local skills and resources;
- Accountability of the state; and
- Creation of institutional base to reduce the cost of access to various social groups in development interventions.

While there is no blueprint for civic engagement because it plays a role in many different contexts, different initiatives and for different purposes, the examples presented here are drawn from evaluative evidence to illustrate various attempts to shift the course of decision-making and control from the center closer to the population at the local level. In doing so, efforts have been made to not only illustrate UNDP supported civic engagement initiatives, but also show innovative examples from governments, civil society, and other multilateral development partners.

Lessons Learned

1. Including non-state actors in development initiatives is a potential source of enhancing ownership and participatory governance

For participation to be meaningful, those involved need to feel they 'own' the process to a significant extent. Although governments and development agencies are increasingly adopting participatory approaches, many have difficulty 'taking the

back seat'. Ownership tends to stay with the development agencies and donors; sometimes it stretches to national governments, but it rarely extends to civil society. Many development initiatives reveal concerns about the lack of involvement of specific groups in the participatory process. Civil society groups have also expressed concerns as to whether governments are limiting participation to information sharing and consultation that prevents civil society groups from playing wider role in local and national governance.

What to Do?

- Promote participatory processes during or prior to programme/initiative design that should be based on needs assessment, participatory monitoring and evaluation through dialogue and consultation with civil society representatives.
- Programme designers and managers need to understand the value added of such participatory processes and develop appropriate skills to access relevant resources in order to foster enhanced and sustained participation and ownership of an initiative. Simply imitating participatory practice is insufficient. It has to be locally developed with clear understanding of people's roles, relationships and expectations so that civic engagement can be improved in projects and successfully extended to policy.
- Strengthen partnership with local government since in many cases, the local government is responsible for granting civil society organizations or groups permission to operate and could play a major role in local revenue raising efforts imperative for the sustainability of an initiative. Efforts should be made to develop capacity of relevant organizations or groups to manage

relations with the local government authorities;

- Identify the complementarity of role among different civil society and government representatives to establish a common agenda and framework for engagement;
- Promote information sharing through local-level consultations with different groups or targets (e.g. farmers' associations, women's groups, neighborhood groups, law-enforcement associations etc.) to learn from the process as well as to learn about the expressed needs of such groups;
- Facilitate and support civil society representatives by engaging them in collaborative and empowerment mechanisms such as working groups, joint implementation bodies, planning teams, steering groups, joint government/stakeholder workshops that can nurture partnership initiatives between public and private sectors and civil society groups, organizations, cooperatives, associations, or broader groups such as chamber of commerce or professional associations. With clear terms of reference such bodies can contribute to national decision-making and policy.

Example:

Global Environment Facility's (GEF) Small Grants Programme (SGP) allocates grants of up to \$50,000, directly to communities, NGOs or community-based organizations (CBOs). Workshops are organized for communities to help them draft grant proposals to meet their specific needs. Activities on the ground are managed by broad-based National Steering Committees (NSCs), consisting of representatives from local NGOs, government, academia, UNDP and occasionally co-funding donors, indigenous peoples' organizations, private sector and the media. Funding decisions are informed, owned and implemented by

local people. These initiatives have demonstrated the important contribution that civil society can make to sustainable development.

Example:

The 1996 Peace of Timbuktu, Mali, was negotiated by the combination of traditional and modern civil society. Donors, including UNDP, played a key role in influencing the Government to provide political space for community leaders who came together for reconciliation. NGOs (both local and international) gave stimulus and encouragement, better communications and some funding.

Centralized government was one of the causes of marginalization (both economic and political) which led to the conflict in Northern Mali. Decentralization was the main premise for the successful negotiations, which produced Mali's National Pact. The Malian government's Concertations Nationales of August 1994 appealed to and mobilized civil society in every region to create a national consensus in favour of peace and reconciliation. Thereafter the leaders of civil society organizations became the brokers of peace, with some NGOs acting as catalysts.

The NGOs took as their starting point the weekly market where nomads and farmers meet and trade, and they created with the Commisariat au Nord a specific project FARNord to promote reconciliation. Meetings brought leaders of the armed movements together with nomadic communities and religious elders to work out specific problems such as how firearms might be controlled in each district, how goods might be assured safe conduct in order to restart commercial activities in the area, and how refugees could be integrated after five years of conflict. Issues that had been the exclusive domain of the earlier one-party state were now debated openly by the local community. Simultaneously, the UNDP-supported demobilization programme, PAREM, helped promote a set

of community projects and revive the social economy.

Example:

South Africa's government with international aid agencies forged a partnership with NGOs to wage a 'National War on Poverty'. This partnership – the National War on Poverty Forum – successfully coordinated the activities of over 2,500 participating organizations. As a national platform for policy dialogue on all issues related to poverty, members of the Forum worked together to implement a single national agenda. A national campaign was organized in 1997 that consisted of a series of public hearings organized through the length and breadth of the country. These public hearings – which went under the name of "Speak Out" – were attended by ten thousand members, including representatives from village groups, CSOs, many of them from the poorest sections of the society.

"Speak Out" promoted a common understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty among NGOs, government agencies, and international organizations. Policy makers and implementing agencies have been forced to pay heed to these voices. Based on the views expressed by the civil society during these hearings, a national action plan was formulated. The materials resulting from the public hearings have also been used to brief decision-makers both nationally and internationally.

2. The institutional framework for effective civic engagement requires access to relevant information

The value added of relevant information flows comes from well-designed participatory process, which is necessary for effective civic engagement. Upward flows are needed to help policy-makers understand better the realities and

perspectives of those living in poverty. Participatory research has proved useful in this regard. Downward flows are needed to inform people of their rights and let them know what policies are being enacted on their behalf. In addition, horizontal information flows can be an empowering tool for capacity building by providing civil society members a forum for exchanging knowledge and ideas, tools and methodologies, training, and moral support.

Information and communication technologies have made it possible for civil society members to engage with each other directly on local, regional and international levels without passing through formal channels. When relevant information is easily accessed and shared broadly, there is greater potential for civil society's needs to be translated into concrete policy and action.

What to do?

- Develop information sharing strategies using participatory approaches to ensure that the members of civil society have access to information and are able to create two-way communication systems that are relevant to their well being;
- Focus on the expressed issues of different groups and provide resources to help them access relevant information not readily available to them;
- Support communities to build on their own knowledge and information capital through mapping of existing resources and addressing gaps;
- Sensitize public authorities (information suppliers) to produce appropriate information resources and build their capacity by documenting and sharing good communication practice and using a range of media (e.g. popular version of policy documents);

- Encourage government to announce early on that a strategy is being developed, explain the stages involved, and reach consensus on where civil society can take part; followed by regular information updates, and steps to encourage media coverage and public debate;
- Invest in developing sustainable Information Communications Technologies (ICTs) for the civil society, which will require provision of ICT equipment and training, and the production of relevant information materials. This could be undertaken through private sector partnership;
- Sensitize and train media on the benefits to be gained from civic engagement in all aspects of development. Look at the effects of information dissemination on the civil society to develop additional methods and indicators, as well as more knowledge of the cost-effectiveness of various communication methods;

Example:

In Porto Alegre, Brazil, a city with a population of 1,300,000, a participative municipal budget decision-making process has ensured that all interested sectors are included. The mayor set up a decentralized system based on neighborhood committees that gave the public access to information on the budget and its utilization and at the same time allowed groups of neighbors to take decisions on how funds were to be used. By 1995 this participative budget process was so successful that more than 100,000 persons were involved in it. Between 1989 and 1995, even in times of hyperinflation in Brazil, Porto Alegre was able to extend access to drinking water from 80% to 98% of the population and access to sewer services from 46% to 76%.

Example:

From the time it began in August 1994, RDS (Spanish acronym for the Sustainable

Development Network of Honduras) made a priority of targeting NGOs, offering communications and networking services that were unavailable or unaffordable from other providers. RDS assembled a Steering Committee of key players from every development sector: government, NGOs, business, and academia to engage dialogue on themes such as human rights, external debt, energy, forestry, environment, women, and civil society. Given that the communication media is owned and managed by the state, RDS – with its 44 member organizations - became a center of alternative information for the civil society.

Example:

The UNDP/Danish Trust Fund on Capacity Development's (DTF) project in Vietnam strengthened the role of representative bodies in Vietnam in general and the role of Provincial People's Councils (PPCs) in particular. The project improved the information available for PPCs for decision-making in two ways: (a) through establishing capacity for surveying the concerns, perceptions and needs of the general population in the pilot areas; and (b) by improving the flow of information on national policies and legislation from the center to the provincial level.

The project was very timely since it provided useful inputs into the deliberations of the National Assembly Committee on modifying the Constitution, and to the discussion on laws pertaining to people's committees and provincial people's councils. The media was used effectively to promote democratic discourse and public participation. Televising the Q & A sessions of the National Assembly served to underline transparency and accountability of both elected members and appointed officials.

3. Expanding the participatory process to include marginalized groups can multiply their capacity to improve their own welfare

Civil society can provide representation for groups that are typically marginalized or excluded from the development process. The interests of women, indigenous groups, ethnic minorities, the disabled, people with AIDS (among others), might not be effectively expressed through political and economic structures outside their communities. They are potentially very active members if they can organize themselves and demand social justice or better share of public resources. In the absence of reliable information and without a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes civil society in a given environment, simply involving civil society groups in the design and targeting of development effort may not help to address the concerns of the most marginalized sections of the society.

What to do?

- Facilitate and support broad-based consultative mechanisms for involving marginalized groups in decision-making processes in local and national development initiatives. This would require the incorporation of equality and equity perspectives in program design, implementation and evaluation;
- Promote legislation to remove legal barriers to participation in public life and development initiatives by marginalized groups;
- Support civil society organizations only after an assessment of their mandate, legitimacy, expertise and accountability have been carried out; working with low-income and marginalized groups using participatory process can also help to identify criteria to decide whether civil society organizations can help marginalized groups achieve their

development concerns (e.g. in accessing decision-making and planning structures and legal services through the provision of such facilities as legal aid and free legal advice centers).

Example:

In the Philippines, after the enactment of the 1997 Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA), local feuds over land ownership broke out among residents in ancestral domain areas of the Cordillera region. Indigenous women, using traditional knowledge systems, emerged as leaders in settling these disputes, forming the Women's Network for Peace and Development. Together with this network, UNDP helped to train these women volunteers to lead community groups, as well as local government units to prepare development plans for their ancestral domains. The volunteers played a lead role in mapping boundaries and fostering peace pacts among communities.

Example:

Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres – Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SPARC-SSP) in India seeks to build and strengthen women-led community institutions that will sustain the social, economic and political empowerment processes. The programme has set up savings and credit groups, which are a source of information, learning and linkages for poor women. It has established other groups, which are used for networking, reconstruction etc. Significant achievements have been made such as making women self-confident, active and articulate; breaking of caste barriers by self-help groups in Mahila Mandals; training of women as masons; willingness of commercial banks to support self-help groups; declining drop out rate of school children; launching of a campaign against liquor consumption by several groups, action to stop early marriages; and encouragement to girls to go to schools.

4. Capacity building for civic engagement can help citizens play an informed role in policy decisions and create political space

Many, if not most, programs for increasing participation specifically provide a capacity building component for beneficiary groups. However, much of that capacity building is not aimed at helping groups achieve better access to the policy process, but at improved internal management or service delivery capacity. Capacity building of civil society representatives for sustained dialogue on national policies requires leadership skills, which is crucial in terms of assisting them to become stronger and providing a base from which to exert greater influence, access policy decision-making structures and play an informed role in policy decisions.

A dynamic civil society is also vital for debating complex issues, such as globalization and poverty, which can offer political space and alliances for expressing different views and pressing for solutions affecting vulnerable populations. Capacity building of beneficiary groups which provides a sound understanding of policy, its opportunities and its constraints is fundamental to making a contribution to the policy decision making process.

What to do?

- Support internal capacity building efforts of civil society groups such as negotiating skills, ability to generate and monitor operating funds, and provide members with an alternative to reliance on patronage networks.
- Train civil society representatives in techniques such as political mapping and policy network analysis that can help bolster understanding of the decision-making system, its leverage points, and how to access decision makers;

- Provide training in awareness of policy cycle, in the data systems used by government officials, using communication techniques which government officials find accessible;
- Advocate mediating and consensus-building skills to facilitate effective networking, alliance building and strategies for presenting the group's agenda and gaining influence. Techniques such as policy analysis can assist relevant stakeholder groups in improving the presentation and articulation of their interests and concerns.

Example:

Since 2000 UNDP has been collaborating with governments to support the preparation of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), which is aimed at putting poverty reduction at the heart of national development through broad based consultations with the civil society. A key component of UNDP's support to Tanzania's poverty reduction efforts was through support of civil society participation in policy dialogue on poverty reduction. UNDP organized pre-consultation workshops for civil society representatives and organizations to prepare them to participate in the national PRSP workshop and understand the PRSP document. Through civic engagement the civil society was able to monitor the quality of basic service delivery, provide upstream feedback and undertake various advocacy initiatives to empower diverse communities, as opposed to a few groups, to communicate their views on priority policy implementation.

Example:

UNDP's Capacity 21 worked in close partnership with governments, civil society and the private sector to develop country-owned, country-driven processes that influence and support national and local policy- and decision-making for sustainable development. In Burkina Faso, for example, Capacity 21 helped nearly 50,000 people

take the lead in defining their country's strategy for combating desertification. A nationwide network of steering committees was established at the national, regional, provincial, departmental and village levels to promote information sharing and awareness raising for integrated natural resource management. Through this network, people involved in planning and management at the village level were empowered and connected with experts and institutions that helped them tackle everyday problems and long-term strategies for continued engagement in decision-making.

Example:

UNICEF's global campaign "Say Yes for Children" asked people from every sector of society to support an agenda with 10 critical actions necessary to ensure every child their right to peace, health and security. Since its launch in April 2001, the campaign reached 194 countries. It rallied the support of human rights activists, parliamentarians, students, grass-roots action groups, community leaders and entire families around a common hope for the world's children. National and international NGOs joined together in coalitions and alliances.

International leaders including Presidents, Prime Ministers and First Ladies, and some 60 celebrities added their voices to Say Yes. Children and young people by the million – activists and change-makers in their own right – seized the opportunity of Say Yes through children's parliaments, schools, and youth groups and associations. They advocated among peers and adults alike for their rights, planning entire campaigns, hosting debates and engaging in discussions on national priorities. A key outcome of the process was the support from the corporate sector that opened new possibilities and encouraged new partnerships around children's rights.

5. Civic oversight is a reservoir of political, economic, cultural and moral resources to check the accountability and transparency of state institutions

Human rights conventions affirm that all people are entitled to participate in government, either directly or through freely chosen representatives. Civic engagement, though an end in itself, can contribute to better governance by improving accountability and transparency in government by monitoring the delivery of development resources.

Factors such as relative strength of the civil society, the nature of political competition in the country, and the nature and effectiveness of state institutions can have a strong bearing on the scope for civil society groups in voicing their concern and seeking active involvement in the affairs of the state, and in setting up accountability and transparency mechanisms.

What to do?

- Assess the local context to establish the level of accountability and transparency of state institutions through the provision of civic "watch dog" groups;
- Engage in civil society/state dialogue on policy-making or accountability, where civil society groups are able to voice their interests and issues;
- Advocate and actively promote key principles and objectives that can demonstrate the practical value of civic oversight for accountability and transparency among state institutions and the representativeness and credibility of civil society groups, e.g. transparency about membership and funding base so that they are seen as legitimate by officials; focus attention on building and supporting alliances around issues from which all classes of society can benefit (e.g. anti-corruption

measures, right to information measures);

- Train advocacy groups in civil society in techniques for assessing government strategy, policy and service initiatives and introduce appropriate benchmarks and tools for monitoring these initiatives;
- Support independent media efforts to expose inappropriate government or private initiatives, and functioning of accountability institutions;
- Support the establishment of complaints procedures in service agencies, and clear rules on redress measures in consultation with civil society representatives.

Example:

The State of Karnataka in India has strengthened the panchayat through legal means. The system acquired force in 1983 with the enactment of a legislation that transferred a wide range of powers from the state to the lower levels. Furthermore, a new legislation made the leader of the panchayats the chief executive of the relevant administrative unit. The system improved even further with an act of 1993, which made the village assembly (gram sabha), consisting of all persons on the electoral roll in the village, the foundation of the entire structure of decentralized governance. This decision was aimed at ensuring that the elected members of panchayats demonstrate accountability. The assembly, which meets twice a year to review the accounts and performance of the village panchayat and identify beneficiaries for various development programs, has provided greater scope for marginalized (low-caste) groups to hold their leaders accountable.

Example:

In 1995, the USAID field mission in Kenya decided to focus on working with CSOs to encourage constitutional, legal, and

administrative reforms. Support was provided for about 30 organizations involved in a range of projects including voter education, election observation, conflict management, human rights monitoring, and women's empowerment. Sixty percent of the groups carried out grass-roots activities, linking rural and urban constituencies. As a result, the USAID-funded Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) engaged in high-profile research and advocacy efforts around the above issues that contributed to the government's effective response to human rights violations by security forces. The civil society approach also produced a minimum package of reforms that lifted many of the 1992 restrictions prior to elections in 1997, and facilitated an agreement among civil society organizations, parliamentarians, and the executive branch that elections would go forward provided that a broader constitutional review began in 1998. Overall, the initiative expanded civic political space, created a better-informed population, and built consensus for a reform agenda that is being actively promoted.

¹ UNDP defines "Civil society" as the space between family, market, and state; it consists of non-profit organizations and special interest groups, either formal or informal, working to improve the lives of their constituents. Civil society organizations (CSOs) include local and international organizations, business and professional associations, chambers of commerce, groups of parliamentarians, media, and policy development and research institutes. As such, the economy, the state, religion, science, the family and community – each differentiated sphere of activity is a defining characteristic of modern civil society. It is exhibited by 'public opinion' and patterned by a set of institutions with distinctive practices like civility, equality, criticism, and respect.

² Social capital has been defined as those aspects of social organization, including networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. See Putnam, 1993.

³ UNDP. Capacity for Development: New Solutions to Old Problems. 2002.

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Contact Institutions

United Nations

UNDP – United Nations Development Programme
<http://www.undp.org>
<http://www.tz.undp.org/areas.html>
UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund
<http://www.unicef.org>
FAO – Food and Agriculture Organization
<http://www.fao.org>
ILO – International Labour Organization
<http://www.ilo.org>
UNIFEM – United Nations Development Fund for Women
<http://www.unifem.org>
UN – United Nations

<http://www.un.org>
 UNCDF – United Nations Capital Development Fund
<http://www.unCDF.org>
 WFP – World Food Programme
<http://www.wfp.org>
 The World Bank
<http://www.worldbank.org>

Other Resources

USAID – United States Agency for International Development
<http://www.usaid.gov>
 CIDA – Canadian International Development Agency
<http://www.cida.org>
 DFID – Department for International Development
<http://www.dfid.gov.uk>
 Danida – Danish International Development Agency
<http://www.um.dk/english>
 GTZ – Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer Technische Zusammenarbeit
<http://www.gtz.de/publikationen/english>
 NORAD – Norwegian Agency for Development Co-operation:
http://www.norad.no/default.asp?V_DOC_ID=860&V_LANG_ID=0
 SIDA – Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency
<http://www.sida.org>
 OECD – Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
<http://www.oecd.org>
 Oxfam
<http://www.oxfam.org>
 Eldis
<http://www.eldis.org>
 IDS
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