

Joint Evaluation of Support to Civil Society Synthesis Report

Civil Society Organisations can have a vital role in the formulation, implementation and follow-up of policy. Donors need to understand and accommodate the complex dynamics of dialogue processes as well as to support an enabling environment for CSO policy engagement. Better financial instruments to support CSOs, as well as instruments to assess civil society policy dialogue engagement are also needed.

This is highlighted in an evaluation of how CSOs pursue their policy dialogue and of how this in turn is supported by Donors. The evaluation is based on cases studied in Bangladesh, Mozambique and Uganda. The main purpose of the evaluation was to gain a better understanding of how to support CSOs in their policy work, but also to provide useful lessons to the CSOs themselves. The evaluation focuses on:

- 1) How CSOs engage in policy dialogue and the effectiveness and relevance of their policy work,
- 2) The enablers and barriers to policy dialogue, and
- 3) How different donor support strategies may influence CSOs' ability to engage in policy dialogue and how to best support their future work.

CSOs have an important role in effective democratic governance and aid effectiveness

The importance of a strong and vibrant civil society which engages in state policies is widely recognised. It is generally seen as both a major conducive factor for the enabling of a vigorous democratic environment and important as an end in itself. This general view was endorsed by donors for example in the Accra Agenda for Action (AAA) in 2008. Here, policy dialogue was defined as, "an open and inclusive dialogue on development policies where governments and local authorities should engage with CSOs in preparing, implementing and monitoring national development policies and plans." This definition was a point of departure for the evaluators.

Results at different levels

The policy dialogue processes studied showed results at various levels. The case studies provided many examples of **process outcomes** such as building of trust and formation of coalitions. There were also **intermediary outcomes**, such as progressive recognition of problems and issues. In some of the cases it was possible to point at successful **policy change outcomes** in the form of new legislation. There is also evidence of CSOs playing a major role in advancing the positions of citizens and community-based organisations giving those key roles in policy engagement. This change in approach in civil society strategy is seen as vital for **long-term outcomes**. Another important long term contribution of CSOs is the research mate-

rial that they, if staffed with experienced, professionally-qualified experts, are able to produce and which is used effectively in a range of advocacy processes.

Different types of policy dialogue requires different modes of public affiliation

The evaluators saw both grassroots-based organisations clearly in touch with their fellow members and CSOs working effectively with key national political matters but without a constituency. They also observed CSOs working both in *Claimed Spaces* (i.e. spaces of policy dialogue that CSOs themselves initiate and set the agenda for, e.g. demonstrations and lobbying) and *Invited Spaces* (i.e. spaces of policy dialogue that governments or local authorities initiate, host and set the agenda for, e.g. statutory oversight bodies and parliamentary standing commissions.) In short-term action, where CSOs mostly engage in *claimed spaces*, CSOs do not necessarily benefit from being constituency-based. However, when the action concerns long-term engagement in *invited spaces* the CSOs in contrast benefit from having a clearly identified constituency.

Political leaders rather than legislation influences civil society environment the most

All three countries had legal provisions and facilities for registration of NGOs/CSOs. However, a country's political leaders (rather than its policies *per se*) shape the realities of the enabling environment, so the situation facing CSOs may in practice be very different from the legal provisions. *Invited spaces* have been offered for CSO engagement to varying degrees, and where governments and CSOs have shared interests (e.g. improving primary education) *invited spaces* are more likely to be provided than in e.g. politically sensitive areas.

How CSOs use claimed spaces is critical for success

Where governments are reluctant to invite CSOs in formal policy dialogue and if CSOs purposely try to raise public interest for a specific cause, it is vital for CSOs to create *claimed spaces* of policy dialogue. The benefit of using *claimed spaces* is the possibility of avoiding pitfalls such as co-optation or manipulation sometimes prevalent in the by governments invited spaces. The *claimed spaces* are however often unstructured and spontaneous and hence difficult to record. Donors may therefore fail to identify them.

Recommendations

The evaluation includes large number of recommendations to CSOs, partner country governments and d. They largely deal with prioritising themes for policy dialogue, having appropriate expectations on CSO engagement, the need for improved monitoring and evaluation and being more pro-active in influencing the enabling environment for policy dialogue. Some of the main recommendations to donors are the following:

Donor partners should conduct regular political economy analyses

The evaluation recommends donor partners to conduct country level contextual and political economy analyses every fifth year in order to identify the range of civil society activity including emerging civil society actors and provide a basis for a more nuanced systems approach for action by CSOs, and support by donor partners. The political economy analyses will also serve the purpose of informing the funding process described below.

New modes of funding are needed

Until now, donor partners have made some encouraging changes to their strategies including adopting a more pluralistic approach to CSOs by increasing recognition and support beyond the traditional CSO and by recognizing the need to work on both sides of the civil society-government engagement process. The evaluation finds, however, that the funding directed towards CSOs tends to be ill equipped to the cause of creating an enabling environment of policy dialogue. Due to the pressure to scale-up disbursements, to produce short-term development results, and to reduce transactions cost, funding is primarily targeted towards CSOs focusing on service-delivery rather than to CSOs engaged in policy dialogue. Solving this would entail a re-thinking of funding approaches where the CSOs themselves as well as International NGOs are invited to engage in the process.

Be sensitive to local and contextual needs

The evaluators usually found a considerable dominance of donor partners' agenda in the support to civil society engagement. This is seen as threat to the independence and the own initiatives of CSOs and runs counter to the idea of a vibrant civil society being a public good and 'an end in itself'. The evaluation shows that there is an evident overlap in a narrow range of themes covered by donor partners in their support of policy dialogue engagement with other key issues marginalised or ignored. It is therefore suggested that CSOs make a stronger effort to promote local and contextual policy priorities and that donor partners are more responsive to these rather than allowing global issues to dominate.

Support actions aimed at facilitating the access to policy dialogue

The evaluation further recommends that the new funding modalities also address the issue of support to organisations, movements and spontaneous activism which cannot (or prefer not to) be registered but which contributes importantly to policy dialogue. Specifically it is recommended that donor partners consider providing funds for public access resources, events, processes. It thereby side-steps the issue of meeting funding eligibility criteria and has the potential for providing a more 'level playing field' for a diverse range of civil society actors.

Provide CSOs with better instruments for monitoring

Monitoring devices need to be improved both for the sake of accountability and for results-based management. This requires that the reported evidence of change is better suited to this type of development intervention and that proper documentation systems are employed. It also requires the development of appropriate indicators and instruments in order to effectively measure policy dialogue processes.

Be more active in influencing the enabling environment for policy dialogue

This holds for both donor partners and governments who need to be more active in promoting *invited spaces* for CSO and civil society engagement. It is also recommended that actions to enhance freedom of speech and access to information are realised and that support to CSO regulatory bodies is provided in order to encourage civil society participation.

Enhance support to independent media and independent journalism

Since media plays a key role in facilitating policy dialogue, donor partners need to recognise the importance of reviewing the regulatory framework within which the media operates. They

further need to secure the independency of the media in face of the threat of increasing state control.

Invest in CSO capacity building

It is also recommended that donor partners' support should devote more resources to empower CSO capacity to engage in policy dialogue. The recommendation suggests a major shift in the approach addressing the importance of up-grading these skills and capacities by investing in capacity building and equipping for modern modes of advocacy (e.g. state of- the-art computers, internet, mobile telephone and other technological innovations which facilitate information gathering and real-time monitoring of policy dialogue and practice).

Strengthen capacity among donor partner staff

Also donor staff, particularly those located in country offices, need to strengthen their capacity in this field. This entails lowering the turnover rate among the personnel. In addition, donor partner staff as well as CSOs and INGOs need to be better connected to grass roots and to people living in poverty.

The evaluation was initiated by the Donor Group on Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness where the three donor partners of ADA (Austria), Sida (Sweden), and Danida (Denmark) commissioned the evaluation on behalf of a broader group of bilateral donor partners which also contributed to the evaluation by forming an international Reference Group.

Reports:

2013:1 Joint Evaluation of Support to Civil Society Engagement in Policy Dialogue, Synthesis Report.

2013:2 Joint Evaluation of Support to Civil Society Engagement in Policy Dialogue – Bangladesh Country Report.

2013:3 Joint Evaluation of Support to Civil Society Engagement in Policy Dialogue – Mozambique Country report.

2013:4 Joint Evaluation of Support to Civil Society Engagement in Policy Dialogue – Uganda Country Report.