

## **The many faces of the aid industry-civil society relationship: Northern field presence in the South**

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The relation between the aid industry and civil society over the past decades has many faces. One obvious face has been the support given by Northern donors to non Governmental organisations and Community Based Organisations as being part of the civil society system. This support partly explains the massive growth in numbers of Southern NGO's. Another, perhaps less obvious face has been the fact that these civil society organisations have often been treated as a means to achieve (Northern-led) development ends, thereby eroding their capacity to set their own goals, build a strong local base and play a meaningful role in the local civil society arena. These and other "faces" will be further explored in the December 2008 INTRAC conference.

Civil society is seen by the writers of this paper and their respective organisations PSO and PRIA as important in its own right. Civil society contributes to a system in which there is space for groups in society to organize, claim their rights, add their share. In any form of sustainable development this space is essential. Civil society is conceptualised in many different ways. It is a set of associations, formal or informal, which bring citizens together around a common public pursuit. It comprises of intermediary organisations, outside the state and the private, for-profit domain, which engage in a variety of activities to promote agendas of social justice, human rights and equity for all. It is also a public sphere for dialogue, debate and conversations among citizens around agendas of common public goods. In all these different ways, strong civil society, along with strong state and private sector, are essential for promotion of both democracy and development for all.

In April 2008 PSO, a membership association of 50 Dutch development agencies, with input from Dr. Rajesh Tandon, President of PRIA (India) organized a meeting with its members to explore another "face" of the relationship between aid industry and civil society: Northern NGO's moving South. Over the last years, PSO noticed an increase in Dutch development agencies, establishing field presence in the South. PSO's main focus is strengthening civil society in the South by further developing the capacity of civil society organizations. The obvious question therefore was: What does this increased Northern presence mean for the capacity of civil society? Does it strengthen civil society in one way or another? Is it neutral or does it erode local capacity?

The available literature on this subject is fairly limited. Of interest here is the 2007, INTRAC publication "So you are thinking of moving South?! A manual for organisations which are considering to move South. The effects on civil society are briefly touched upon in this manual.

A study commissioned by PSO in 2008 amongst its members by Dr. Georgina Gomez<sup>1</sup>, provided some interesting insights in the Dutch situation.

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<sup>1</sup> Field presence of Dutch NGOs: What is the impact on civil societies in the South? Dr. Georgina M. Gómez, July 2008, PSO publication.

## **Motivation**

The decision whether to have field presence in the South brings the tension between institutional and developmental imperatives facing NGO's to the table.<sup>2</sup> Institutional imperatives refer to the priorities that the agency thinks it has to take to survive and development imperatives refer to what it should be doing to fulfil its mission statement. Commitment to sustainability and strengthening civil societies in the South are often part of this imperative.

The motivation for most Dutch organisations to move South and keep local field offices and/or permanent officers at the site of the project is the conviction that proximity to the target groups and partners in the South would make their own organisation more efficient and effective. Extra funding, reporting on measurable and quick results, avoiding mistakes and proving effectiveness are important considerations. In these cases the institutional imperatives often take precedence over developmental imperatives. Other Dutch organisations decided against having a field presence from the conviction that it is unnecessary and might even have a negative impact on the capacity building of civil society actors in the South. Here often the development imperatives prevailed. However, some organisations opted for a field presence in the South while carefully balancing both imperatives.

An interesting aspect also came up in the debate PSO member organisations had on this issue. It was pointed out that the EU policy of decentralized funding stimulates Northern NGOs to move South. To access these decentralized funds it is essential to be locally present, to be "there where the funds are." Local organisations on the other hand often notice that the only way to access these funds is by being a junior partner to an European development agency, thereby reinforcing the already often existing power asymmetry. The effect of international donor policies is much wider on this relationship. All donors are now promoting in-country competitive bidding for funds. This is consistent with the principles of the Paris declaration, and is a tool for results-based management. A recent DFID bid on Governance & Transparency Fund was successful for those southern civil society who had northern civil society members as lead partners in the consortium, especially for multi-country projects.

When looking at the motivation of organisations to move to the South an important distinction has to be made between organisations that are working in the field of humanitarian relief and those that focus on structural development work. "There seems to be a wide consensus among members that direct field presence is necessary for humanitarian relief works because it makes responses faster, more effective and legitimate."<sup>3</sup> At least for the first 2-3 years.

## **Effects on civil society actors**

The perception of Dutch NGOs on the effects field presence might have on civil society is often not based on a thorough analysis. Apparently, it is not a question automatically posed by organisations when deciding to move South or stay South. While answering this question the researcher structured the effects around the five core capabilities which determine a strong civil society organisation as

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<sup>2</sup> Edward, 1996

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Georgina Gomez, July 2008, PSO publication

defined by Morgan.<sup>4</sup> These are: the capability to act, to generate development results, to relate, to adapt and self-renew and to achieve coherence.

What are some of the positive effects as seen by Dutch development agencies? Many claim that direct presence makes capacity building faster, smoother and easier, so it supports the development effort of southern NGOs and sometimes other civil society actors. (capability to generate development results) Some see field presence as a catalyst for capacity building and learning: Southern NGOs can get access to hitherto closed networks and gain from the role model of northern NGOs in terms of organisational capacities (capability to relate and to act). The question is of course, how sustainable it is to copy someone else's model instead of developing your own. (capacity to adapt and to achieve coherence).

On the negative side it was mentioned that the presence of Northern development agencies introduces extra competitors for funds and staff and takes over the role of the local civil society organisation. It thereby reduces the central role of Southern civil society organisations in their own field. It hampers the space of local civil society organisations to organise, grow and push for social change. The capability to relate is most effected in this case. Another risk is the risk of excessive control and interference by Northern field offices of Southern organisation. One of the experts interviewed on this subject in the research, Chiku Malunga underlines that "you don't have the capacity" is frequently a matter of 'I do not want to give you the space".

An often used argument by Northern development agencies is that their field office is actually local and embedded, because most staff are locals. Southern experts like Malunga disagree: If you can go home as soon as things go wrong, you are in a different position, you are more powerful. Others add to this that locally hired staff because of their wages and other arrangements in fact are in a different position than local civil society actors.

Another interesting aspect concerns the political involvement of Northern field offices. They should and do avoid getting mixed up in local politics. By this fact alone they remain an outsider and do not fill the role a local civil society organisation could.

Also ideological reasons against field presence were mentioned. What does it mean for mutual trust and respect to local civil society?

Dr. Tandon could illustrate these effects by examples from his experience in South Asia:

- ❖ A key dynamic of effective civil society actions is the multi-stakeholder nature of local engagements. Civil society has to engage with local community, even those not being 'served' by it, local elected representatives, local government officials, media, and other local civil society. In this sense, northern actors can distort local stakeholder relations through their direct and perpetual presence. Local media, officials and political system construes these as examples of 'foreign hand'.

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<sup>4</sup> ECDPM, Morgan, 2007

- ❖ A key contribution of, as well as source of nurturance for, civil society is social capital. Such local relations of trust and communication are feasible only when endogenous actors, with local roots, are seen to be in driver's seat. It is not merely a question of local staff in northern actors; it is also a question of local accountability.
- ❖ Sustained actions on deepening democracy and ensuring local development require changing relations of power. Local actors, how so much powerless, may need to be enabled and empowered to begin to acquire the capacity, networks and tools for acting to change those relations of power. Getting someone else to do so makes gains in the short run, but does not create sustainable trajectories of influence.

### **Where to go from here?**

Both PSO and PRIA, being organisations having the strengthening of civil society and civil society organisations at its core, strongly recommend that one of the aspects of good donorship entails consciously taking into consideration the effect on civil society in the South when Northern agencies make decisions. It is not about whether or not to be present in the South, but whether by your actions you contribute to achieving the aim of stimulating sustainable development and just societies. Civil society has an important place in this.

If an organization on the basis of institutional imperatives (in order to be more efficient, or to survive) should move south a rule of thumb is: Also take into account development imperatives! This means to start with:

- ❖ Do not enter into competition for funds with local organisations
- ❖ Do transfer as many decision making powers as possible to local partners.
- ❖ Support local organisations, use your own available capacity to strengthen them, move them to the forefront, even when it is about accessing local EU and other funds.
- ❖ Limit your numerical presence to limit power asymmetries and keep similar wage levels to avoid brain-drain.

Southern civil societies of course also have a role to play to influence their Northern donors to consider the effects of their decisions on civil society. PRIA has witnessed a number of successful strategies in the south. To inspire you with a few of them:

- ❖ Discuss with your Northern relationships what the effect of their decisions and actions is on civil society
- ❖ Discuss with your northern coalitions and peers examples of positive and negative outcomes in such practices to identify key factors that make such southern presence sustainable

For back donors such as the EU but also the Dutch Government there are also lessons to be learnt:

- ❖ Consider what the effects might be of your funding policy on (the space) of civil society

- ❖ Devise your funding policy in such a way that development imperatives prevail: strengthen local capacity, provide space for local actors without putting them in the junior position.
- ❖ Review past evaluation reports of major programmes of service delivery routed through northern NGOs with local offices in order to identify factors that make such actions sustainable from the durability of service delivery point-of-view, and try to incorporate the same in your guidelines.

It is by mutual influencing and education that we can move forward to create more space for civil society and civil society actors.

Let us use the 2008 INTRAC conference to draw up our good donorship and good Southern civil society guidelines on strengthening civil society.