

**Civil society in poverty alleviation:
perspectives from Tanzania, Ethiopia and Central America**

Eileen Connolly
Centre for International Studies
School of Law and Government
Dublin City University
e-mail: eileen.connolly@dcu.ie

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Abstract

Although donor discourse on international development policy places less emphasis on civil society than formerly this paper presents evidence from Tanzania, Ethiopia and Central America that aid for civil society has had a positive effect on the capacity of Southern civil society. As a result of international pressure, civil society in these developing states now face a more open environment for both advocacy and service provision, while financial support has allowed a much greater level of activity than would otherwise have been possible. This article is drawn from a larger study funded by the Advisory Board for Irish Aid, which examined the potential role of civil society in poverty reduction. It identifies the current threat to the continued development of civil society as coming from the narrowing of the potential role of civil society in the OECD aid harmonisation agenda and management and capacity constraints on the part of donors that curtails their engagement with this type of support.

Keywords: civil society, donor policy, PRSPs, gender

Donor discourse on international development policy currently places less emphasis on civil society than formerly¹. This change of focus is in the context of the widespread acceptance of formal representative democracy as an international norm, the continuing development failure in Sub Saharan Africa and the increased level of international security instability – a set of circumstances which has shifted the policy priority from promoting democracy to ensuring effective governance for development, and intervention in civil conflicts and situations of state failure. This is in contrast to the early 1990s when donors began to focus strongly on strengthening civil society to the extent that one influential study argued that by the mid 1990s ‘...the general notion that civil society development is critical to democratisation [became] a new mantra in both aid and diplomatic circles’², with the result that donor policy placed significant emphasis on the role of civil society in economic and political development. The practical outcome of this policy focus in terms of the engagement with and funding for Southern civil society has been subject to extensive criticism, primarily for its crudeness, insensitivity to local conditions and the instrumental use of local groups to further donor policy priorities.³ These criticisms were matched by numerous practical problems for donors, engaged in funding civil society.⁴ During this initial period of funding activity, civil society was viewed as a vehicle to push the state towards democracy by insisting on accountability and transparency. As part of the new ‘good governance’ agenda the projected role of civil society has become more circumscribed and has been institutionalised as playing a consultative role in state led policy processes and development programmes. As a corollary to this the central role of the state in development has been re-affirmed in donor policy.⁵

The role of civil society in development, and the part that development agencies might play in supporting civil society has therefore been through a very significant period of flux that has raised questions about the efficacy and nature of civil society engagement. A study published in 2000 found that in spite of donor support and its focus on the advocacy role of civil society, there was very little evidence that southern civil society had developed the capacity to fulfil this role – which seemed to point to a failure in donor policy.⁶ In the light of recent changes in the development policy environment, this paper analyses the results of studies of civil society groups carried out in Tanzania, Ethiopia and Central America in 2005-6 that investigated

¹ Notwithstanding a new interest in social movements which even extends to the World Bank.

² Ottaway and Carothers, 2000

³ Van Rooy, 1998; Howell, 2000; Howell and Pearce, 2002; Edwards and Hulme, 1995.

⁴ CIS, 2007b: 16-17.

⁵ For example see DIFID, 2006.

⁶ Ottaway and Carothers, 2000.

their perspectives on their role in development and poverty alleviation; the policy space in which they operate, particularly the PRSP; and their relationships with national governments, donors, INGOs and other civil society groups. It also discusses the issue of gender which the 2000 study considered to be the one area of advocacy success for CSOs.

While this article focuses on the perspectives of Southern civil society organisations, it draws on a wider study of the role of civil society in poverty alleviation, which was conducted for and funded by the Advisory Board for Irish Aid. The study was particularly important in Ireland given the rapidly increasing aid budget and the strong support given to Irish development NGOs by Irish Aid. The wider study also examined the perspectives of official donors and of Irish development NGOs on the role of both Northern NGOs and Southern civil society in development; possible lessons from Ireland's own development experience and in particular the role of social partnership; and it made policy recommendations on the future direction of Irish Aid's policy on engagement with civil society for consideration by the Advisory Board.⁷ In this context, it will first discuss the changing role of civil society in donor policy discourse. Then, following a brief introduction to the political and economic conditions in each country, the article moves on to analyse the detail of the interviews conducted with civil society organisations in Tanzania, Ethiopia and Central America, focusing on issues of dependency, influence and reach; the PRSP process and the development of advocacy; and the particular experience of groups focused on gender issues.

Civil society in development policy

The conceptual shift from the idea of a 'minimal' to an 'effective' state and a focus on citizen participation through an active civil society is embedded in the World Development Report (WDR) 1997.⁸ This report laid the foundation for the World Bank's '*Comprehensive Development Framework*' (CDF) in 1998, which replaced structural adjustment programmes. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, which were to be a state led process, were developed as the vehicle for implementing the CDF and were intended to provide a framework for domestic policies and

⁷ The working papers from the full project are available on the website of Dublin City University's Centre for International Studies, <http://www.dcu.ie/~cis/civilsociety.html>. They can be downloaded and referenced provided they are cited and acknowledged.

⁸ See for example Doornbos 2001: 98; Slater and Bell 2002: 343.

programmes on poverty reduction, as well as a context for improved coordination of international development assistance.⁹ The inclusion of civil society, it was believed, would strengthen the process in two ways; by increasing equity through its assumed pro-poor orientation, and by building consensus around development policies and outcomes, because a wide range of interests would be represented in the wording of the final document.¹⁰ Importantly, it was also seen as fulfilling a good governance function, by acting as a watchdog on the actions of government, and improving accountability and transparency in the political system.

In this model, the service provision role envisaged for both Northern NGOs and Southern civil society followed the pattern established for civil society in developed states in the context of neo-liberal reforms.¹¹ They were to provide innovative ideas and solutions, as well as strengthening the impact of development programmes by providing local knowledge. In addition to this, they were to provide services in post conflict situations or humanitarian crises where the state was weak or absent.¹²

The advocacy role which is a feature of the policy perspective of many international donors¹³ is muted in the World Bank's view of civil society's role. Civil society is described as providing a voice for the poor and marginalised. The idea that civil society will contribute to an enabling environment for 'good' governance represents a weakening of the view of civil society as a key element and promoter of democracy. More limiting still is the idea that civil society's role is promoting local ownership of the PRSP process and reform programme. The Bank has a particular interpretation of the term 'local ownership' which is counter intuitive, as it means that a country has accepted and internalised the policy programmes favoured by the World Bank. The Bank links the concept of 'ownership' with the acceptance of World Bank policy as expressed through conditionalities.¹⁴

In the Bank's view, a key role for civil society in developing states is promoting and engaging with the PRSP process. Since the introduction of the PRSPs, the World Bank and bilateral donors have strengthened the 'governance' agenda as part of the allocation of aid, and as a result improving 'governance' has become a key part of the donor focus on aid effectiveness and harmonisation. PRSPs are now the major

⁹ DFID, 2006: 120; World Bank, 2004, 2006.

¹⁰ World Bank, 2002: 239.

¹¹ Connolly, 2007.

¹² World Bank, 2005.

¹³ See CIS, 2007b.

¹⁴ World Bank, 2005: 13.

vehicle through which donors and IFIs are harmonising aid to participating countries, and through which they expect progress towards the MDG targets to be made. This is particularly significant in the context of the international declarations on aid harmonisation and aid effectiveness; the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005) and the associated Rome Declaration on Harmonisation (2003) which reflect and formalise a process that was already underway amongst key donors.¹⁵ A core assumption of this policy is that national development plans, including the PRSPs, are evolved through a democratic process, to which local civil society groups have contributed. On this basis it is implicitly assumed that civil society (including both foreign and local civil society organisations) should work within the framework of these plans or be contractors to central government/donors in delivering the plan.

The study by Ottaway and Carothers, assessing the effectiveness of donor engagement at the end of the 1990s, examined the impact of civil society based approaches to democracy promotion at micro, meso and macro levels, using case studies from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Latin America.¹⁶ The findings on the effectiveness of funding for civil society in the 1990s are revealing. At the micro level, the impact of civil society assistance was found to be 'nothing short of dramatic', the funding had created and kept alive thousands of NGOs in the assisted countries. The report also found that the form of civil society aid used in this period had implanted the idea, that NGOs represent the model of what civil society in democratic countries, should be, to the possible detriment of other types of civil society organisations.

At the macro and meso levels, the key question addressed in the study was whether civil society was stronger and played a more important role in political life as a result of assistance from donors – with success being measured in terms of the capacity to engage in advocacy. Success on the advocacy front varied considerably; in Africa and the Middle East there was little effect on policy processes, while in Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America the results were more positive, but even here policy work was often being carried out on behalf of citizens, with whom the NGOs often had little real contact, and thus it was not equivalent to the broader goals of interest

¹⁵ IDA/World Bank, 2007.

¹⁶ Carnegie Endowment study on Civil Society Aid and Democracy Promotion: 'Funding Virtue' (Ottaway and Carothers 2000). This study is interesting as was undertaken before the current PRSP processes. The primary focus was US official aid but some aspects of the study also examined European aid. In this regard the case study on South Africa noted a striking similarity, even overlap and duplication, among donors' themes and programmes (Landsberg 2000).

representation and citizen participation¹⁷. However, NGOs that promoted women's rights were found to be a major exception, in that this issue not only attracted donor funds, but could also gain widespread grassroots support. At the macro level, the study found no evidence that civil society assistance was a major factor in the promotion of democracy, or that it had helped to create political pluralism. It concluded that contrary to key donor aims, civil society was not creating a more pluralist political system, nor was it a key factor in promoting democracy, and at a lower level it was not even a very effective policy advocate. This study argues that from the late 1990s to the present, civil society has made progress in its capacity for advocacy at the meso and macro levels, with women's organisations and groups working on gender issues being particularly strong.

Southern Civil Society post 2000: Tanzania, Ethiopia and Central America

This aspect of the wider study is based on work carried out in Tanzania, Ethiopia and Central America during 2005 and 2006. The two Sub Saharan African case studies were chosen from Irish Aid's programme countries for the contrast in the structure of the state, level of civil society development, and state civil society relations. The type of state is important as civil societies in all contexts emerge in response to the form of the state, and the political opportunity structure provided by the state. An added factor in developing states is that of the presence of donors and the availability of donor funding for civil society, which provides an additional layer of 'opportunity structure' and would be expected to influence the structure and focus of civil society. In addition donor engagement with states may influence the degree of openness of public space for civil society engagement.

Tanzania is a stable, multi-ethnic state, with diverse religious affiliations, and a defacto one-party state, notwithstanding the institution of multiparty democracy in 1995. During the following years the strength of the governing CCM party has increased (winning 80% of the vote in the 2005 presidential elections) and the political opposition has remained weak and fragmented. The strengthening of the government party to the point where a viable alternative government for voters does not exist is a trend in democratic African states which could have implications for

¹⁷ The relationship between most donor-supported civil society organisations and the constituency in whose name they speak has been characterised as trusteeship rather than representation (Ottaway and Carothers, 2000).

donors' funding relationship with those states. Ethiopia represents an alternative African experience in that it is a post-conflict state that has recently emerged from a prolonged period of ethnic conflict and which currently has a federal state structure reflecting ethnic divisions, but with highly contested elections for political power at the centre. Tanzania and Ethiopia are both extremely aid dependent with very high levels of absolute poverty. Central America, also an Irish Aid area of interest, was chosen as an international comparator that, while still emerging from the conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s, is now composed of democracies with longer historic roots than the African cases and is also more integrated into the international economy. Their civil societies are more developed in that they have a greater density of organisations, higher capacity and a longer history of engagement (if a conflictual one) with the state. Also, while Tanzania and Ethiopia lack the social and economic cleavages that have formed the basis for both political parties and political activism in established democracies of the Global North, the countries of central America have political party systems and civil societies that are highly polarised on distributional issues along a right-left cleavage, in a model nearer to the European experience.

Table 1 – Comparative social indicators, 2005

	Tanzania	Ethiopia	Nicaragua	Honduras	El Salvador	Guatemala	Costa Rica	Ireland
HDI placing	162	170	112	117	104	117	47	4
Gini co-efficient on inequality	0.38	0.30	0.43	0.55	0.53	0.6	0.47	0.36
% below national poverty line	36%	44%	48%	53%	48%	56%	22%	9%
% living on less than \$1 per day	60%	90%	45%	21%	31%	16%	2%	0
GDP per cap PPP adjusted (US\$)	\$674 pa	\$756	\$3262	\$2665	\$4781	\$4148	\$9606	\$38,800
Av. Life expectancy (years)	46	48	70	68	71	67	78	78
Gender Development Index	80	n/a	88	n/a	80	94	44	50
Gender empowerment Index	36	n/a	n/a	74	62	n/a	19	17

Table 1 sets out basic social and economic indicators for the seven countries involved in the study, along with Ireland for comparative purposes. It shows both the deep poverty across all the countries in this study and also some significant variations. Life expectancy in Tanzania and Ethiopia is a clear indicator of the depth of poverty there and the impact of AIDS – even compared to the poorest Central American countries. However even though the GDP per capita in Central America is much higher than the African countries, even for the poorest countries in the region, they still experience very significant percentages of their population living in deep poverty, with the percentage living below \$1 per day in Nicaragua, not much lower than Tanzania. If national poverty lines are used only Costa Rica has a lower percentage of people in poverty than either Tanzania or Ethiopia. Clearly this is related to the much worse internal inequality in Central America as indicated by the Gini coefficient figures.

The study limited the civil society groups it surveyed to those whose aims and focus of work had an anti-poverty dimension. For the three case studies this required a form of mapping exercise to establish lists of CSOs.¹⁸ From the mapping exercise, a picture of the recent development of civil society emerged. The pattern of the foundation of the civil society groups surveyed, followed the changing pattern of donor interest in each case. In Tanzania only 7% of CSOs had been set-up prior to 1989, and 50% were formed between 1995 and 2000 – the period of highest donor interest internationally and also the period in which Tanzanian democracy developed.¹⁹ Only 12% of the Tanzanian groups surveyed had been formed after the year 2000, indicating a tailing off of CSO formation. The Ethiopian study differs from the Tanzanian study in that there are a higher percentage of groups at either end of this time range, reflecting at one end the existence of some older CSOs in Ethiopia and at the other end of this time line, a slightly later liberalisation of the domestic political environment.²⁰ 37% of Ethiopian CSOs surveyed were formed between 1992 and 1999, reflecting the period of highest international donor interest in civil society and the major change in government in Ethiopia in 1992 following the defeat of the old Derge regime. The later post-conflict liberalisation is also reflected, as almost one third of CSOs were formed after 2000. In Central America the early 1990s was the period when the vast majority of CSOs were formed – also reflecting the post conflict engagement by donors. The level of engagement was not sustained

¹⁸ For details see full working papers on each case – CIS 2007d, 2007e, 2007f.

¹⁹ CIS, 2007d: 17.

²⁰ CIS, 2007e: 17.

and despite new CSOs emerging, the total number of CSOs in the region mapped by the Arias Foundation's Ceiba Data Base declined over the course of the 1990s.²¹

In Central America the extreme political polarisation of the states in the region impacts on the structure of civil society. Civil society that emerged both during and after the recent conflicts in Central America, is well developed but it is both highly polarised and highly politicised. It is fractured along a left-right cleavage, (representing those seeking radical structural change in society to deal with inequality, versus those broadly supportive of or at least accepting of the status quo) and this cleavage reflects the political purposes, which civil society organisations have served in the past. On the left, social movements and community organisations supported political movements for change, and at the extreme armed guerrilla movements. On the right, conservative parties set up their own CSOs to perform charitable social functions, to attract foreign aid, and to compete with radical groups. The polarisation has been intensified by the US policy of funding CSOs in Central America, in a context strongly framed by its strategic foreign policy goals. However, the groups most active in the civil space and on poverty issues have been on the broad left. This is because the state itself has for the most part been dominated by those on the right.²²

Political opposition to the dominant parties of government also finds an outlet in civil society organisations in Tanzania and Ethiopia. In Tanzania the absolute dominance of the ruling CCM in elections on the Tanzanian mainland and the absence of any opposition parties capable of offering a credible alternative government has meant that many people have chosen to play a role of critiquing the government from within civil society rather than opposition political parties.²³ In Ethiopia the political system is highly polarised and while the ruling coalition which is in power since the overthrow of the old Derge regime won the last election comfortably, there was significant regional variation in support and the opposition won all seats in the capital city Addis Ababa. Some CSOs are clearly government aligned and others are linked to the opposition. In some regions CSOs are effectively organised on ethnic lines reflecting local demographic patterns.²⁴

²¹ CIS, 2007f: 12.

²² The research for this project was completed before the victory of the left in the Nicaraguan elections. It remains to be seen how civil society, which now strongly asserts its independence from political parties will adapt to the new political situation.

²³ CIS, 2007d: 9-12.

²⁴ CIS, 2007g: 15 & 38.

The impact of the transition to democracy on civil society is still being felt as a process of change in each of the case studies. In Central America it was experienced as an increased acceptance of the legitimacy of the state, irrespective of the political complexion of government and a recognition that it was necessary for civil society to engage with the state in order to achieve pro-poor outcomes. The degree to which this idea, of state engagement, was supported varied considerably between individual states. A section of civil society in the region was still adjusting from being an oppositional social movement, and fears were expressed that in accepting an advocacy role in the policy process, civil society were losing their capacity to seek more systematic and radical pro-poor changes.²⁵ In Tanzania, the transition to democracy gradually opened up space for civil society. Initially as the single party state was dismantled and trade unions, women's groups and youth groups became separated from that dominant party, establishing civil society organisations and gaining external funding became possible. In the absence of any significant opposition parties, civil society provided a site for the critique of government, which has at times resulted in punitive actions being taken against individual groups.²⁶

In Ethiopia, the legacy of ethnic conflict, suspicion of the central institutions of state and lower levels of aid have been factors in stunting the development of civil society. In contrast to Tanzania, political opposition does exist in Ethiopia – there is a very active political opposition challenging for central state power, who oppose the ethnic power sharing and federalism of the current constitution and there are ethnically based opposition movements in different parts of the country. The tensions arising from the wider political context, ongoing food insecurity and the toleration by the former Derge regime of international NGOs involved in food aid²⁷ has meant that in Ethiopia Northern NGOs, with the support of the state, have tended to crowd out local civil society. While the survey in Ethiopia did not pick up overtly expressed negative sentiments towards Northern NGOs, it was noticeable that at the national (as opposed to regional) level Northern NGOs were much more central to 'domestic' policy dialogue with government than in either Tanzania or Central America (in the context of a lower overall level of civil society engagement with the state).

²⁵ CIS, 2007f: 27.

²⁶ For example restrictions were placed on the activities of Haki Elimu in 2006 following a dispute with a government minister.

²⁷ CIS, 2007f: 3.

Issues of dependency, influence and reach

Formal organised civil society in the three case studies is extremely donor dependent and that level of dependence is likely to continue into the future in the absence of internal sources of funding or a domestic support base with the resources to fund organised civil society activity.²⁸ In Ethiopia, of those CSOs willing to discuss their income 98% received funds from donors or INGOs, with almost 60% of CSOs receiving more than 80% of their income from these sources. In Tanzania 93% of CSOs were funded by donors/INGOs, with over 60% of them receiving more than 60% of their income from them. Civil society groups themselves see no way out of this dependent relationship and only argue for greater freedom to determine their own priorities in both service provision and advocacy.²⁹

Donor funding has a limited direct reach down to smaller, local or community based civil society groups. The problem of providing small grants to local groups with a potential to produce a significant anti-poverty impact for a very small outlay, which has been identified by donors, has been very difficult to implement in practice. Administrative and fiduciary requirements have meant that even 'small grant' schemes are beyond the capacity of their target groups. Embassies do not have the staffing levels or expertise to allow them effectively engage with local groups. Pool-funded schemes combining the resources of a number of embassies have been no more successful. These difficulties are well illustrated by the length and complexity of the application form for the pool-funded Foundation for Civil Society in Tanzania. The style of management and project planning information requested was completely beyond the capacity of the target groups and led many applicants to employ consultants to write their proposals.³⁰ The Irish NGO Concern had a significant element of their civil society capacity building programme in Tanzania focused on building the capacity of locally organised groups to bring them to a point where they could apply for donor funding.³¹

The areas of activity of civil society groups in the three cases (drawn from their stated aims) are extremely clustered around issues that have been prominent in donor agendas and points to the skewing of civil society activity by the availability of donor

²⁸ CIS 2007d: 21; CIS 2007e: 24; CIS 2007f: 29.

²⁹ CIS 2007d: 22-23.

³⁰ CIS 2007d: 24.

³¹ CIS, 2007d: 35.

funds for specific purposes, rather than to build the capacity of civil society in a more general sense. This influence of donor funding patterns is especially clear in the two African cases and in the large proportion of groups, across all three case studies working on gender issues. HIV-AIDS was the largest stated area of focus in both the African cases (37% in Ethiopia and 26% in Tanzania), followed by women's rights / gender (32% and 22%) respectively. In Ethiopia, despite very high levels of poverty and food insecurity almost 50% of CSOs are engaged in advocacy work on either HIV or women's issues, and only 15% are engaged in service provision in the areas of 'income generation', 'relief' and 'food security'.³² In Central America the areas of work were drawn from the Arias Foundation's Ceiba Data Base which allows multiple areas to be selected. Here the single greatest area of focus was education and training – focused on capacity building rather than the mainstream school system. Almost half of all groups are involved in women's rights and 31% said they were focused on the environment.³³

This survey also confirms the sense that the focus of civil society organisations is shifting from service provision to 'advocacy'.³⁴ 74% of Tanzania CSOs, 71% of Ethiopian CSOs and almost all Central America CSOs are involved in advocacy.³⁵ Advocacy is broadly defined by CSOs to include public education and information campaigns, promoting particular policy perspectives and representing group interests. Those groups who receive direct support from donors and who appear to have the highest domestic profiles are primarily focused on advocacy. However the areas of advocacy are again heavily skewed towards areas of donor interest. This was especially clear in Ethiopia which was the country with the lowest level of advocacy capacity³⁶ and the lowest level of peer networking among NGOs themselves.³⁷

The PRSP process and the development of civil society advocacy

The perception amongst the Southern civil society organisations surveyed is that the public space in which they operate has expanded in recent years and they have

³² CIS, 2007e: 18 & 38.

³³ CIS, 2007f: 12.

³⁴ CIS, 2007d: 18; CIS, 2007e: 17-19; CIS, 2007f: 26.

³⁵ CIS, 2007d: 18; CIS, 2007e: 18; CIS, 2007f: 27.

³⁶ CIS, 2007e: 18-19.

³⁷ CIS, 2007e: 35-36.

greater freedom to operate.³⁸ In all cases the relationship between the state and civil society was considered to have improved. This was a consensus view in Tanzania and Central America. Even in the more difficult environment in Ethiopia 64% of CSOs said that their operating environment had become more open in the last 5 years.³⁹

Given that for donors and the World Bank, the PRSP process was intended both as the major anti-poverty strategy and a key vehicle for civil society engagement, to what extent has the PRSP processes been responsible for the improvement in the operating space experienced by civil society? In Tanzania, which has been cited internationally as a blueprint for a successful PRSP process, the evidence that the framework provided by the PRSP process was an enabling one is the strongest of the cases studied. In Ethiopia and the two Central American states with PRSP processes (Honduras and Nicaragua) the perceived impact of the PRSP in providing advocacy opportunities for civil society appears to have been minimal.

In Tanzania the first PRSP process was widely seen as unsatisfactory by those CSOs who participated in it. Following that process Tanzanian CSOs organised themselves to provide an effective engagement with the second PRSP in 2005. Considerable energy was put into engaging with the process nationally by high capacity NGOs and networks and they estimated that more than half a million people participated in the various fora held across the country.⁴⁰ After the first PRSP, Tanzanian CSOs had been critical of the short timeframe available for organisation and therefore felt unprepared to meet the challenges of the process. This was not the case with the second PRSP process, as civil society groups had established a network through which they could co-operate and were prepared for engagement in the process. The experience left them dissatisfied with the process which they considered was primarily an engagement between the state and donors, into which they could have little effective input. Involvement in the web of consultations, working groups and meetings that made up the PRSP process was considered by CSOs to be very time and resource intensive and they balanced this against their perception that much of the outcome was pre-determined. Their dissatisfaction is reflected by the fact that civil society membership of Poverty Monitoring System technical working groups, set up as part of the second PRSP has deteriorated. Today, there are only six civil society members across all four working groups,

³⁸ This positive assessment was weakest in Ethiopia, CIS, 2007e: 21.

³⁹ CIS, 2007e: 21.

⁴⁰ Hakikazi Catalyst (Tanzanian CSO) 2005 p6.

despite the fact that twelve places should be allocated to civil society.⁴¹ In 2006 the Policy Forum (the key NGO network in the country) reviewed its organisational strategy to reflect this dissatisfaction with government-led processes, including the PRSP. It now selectively engages in only those policy processes which it feels it can enhance and influence. It intends to reduce 'the proportion of time spent in participating in formal consultation processes'.⁴²

In Tanzania, when all CSOs were asked if there had been any positive impacts on the final PRSP document the most common areas mentioned were gender policy and pastoralist rights. When high capacity groups were asked to be more specific about the precise policy changes, policy addressing female genital mutilation, violence against women, and inheritance were the primary areas where civil society felt they had achieved a positive outcome through PRSP.⁴³ The CSOs which were perceived by their peers to be the most influential in policy analysis and activism were Haki Elimu⁴⁴, Haki Kazi Catalyst⁴⁵, Tanzania Media Women's Association (TAMWA), Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP), PINGOS, and the Policy Forum network (formerly NGO Policy Forum).⁴⁶ The sectoral areas most frequently mentioned were gender mainstreaming, educational policy, and pastoralists' rights.

In contrast, the majority of civil society groups in Ethiopia (76.5 %) were not involved in the first PRSP process in any way.⁴⁷ The level of disconnect with the process was such that almost two thirds of the sample felt unable to answer any questions on civil society involvement in PRSP as they did not even have knowledge of the experience of other groups who had been involved. Of those who answered questions in this area (only 37% of the sample) almost one third of those answering thought CSOs had simply been given information, 18% said civil society was 'consulted' and 22% said there was 'active participation'. Of those who said their organisation had actually been involved in the process in some way and who felt they could comment on the document (which was only just over 20% of all CSOs surveyed), approximately half of those replying said there had been 'some' impact on

⁴¹ For example, the Communications TWG has 17 to 23 seats of which six to twelve are reserved for government, two for academic bodies, three for development partners, one for a UN Agency, three for civil society and two for the private sector.

⁴² Policy Forum 2006 p4 -11 Instead, it intends to focus more on independent analysis and monitoring of policy developments, capacity development of members and making policy accessible and available to policy makers, civil society and the general public.

⁴³ Corrigan 2007: 21; CIS, 2007d: 29.

⁴⁴ A high capacity education sector CSO

⁴⁵ A CSO working on community development

⁴⁶ CIS, 2007d: 29.

⁴⁷ CIS, 2007e: 32-36.

the final document, with 22% saying no impact and 24% saying substantial impact. When asked to say what those impacts were, only 10% of these respondents could identify any area, even in the most general of terms – with ‘women’s issues’ being the most often mentioned followed by the vague ‘CSO perspectives’, ‘some social issues’ and ‘pastoralist issues’.⁴⁸ The focus on gender and pastoralists (both areas of high donor interest) followed the pattern in Tanzania, though it has to be treated with caution given the very small number of Ethiopian CSOs who felt they knew anything about the PRSP.

Of the three cases, the PRSP process has been most advanced and had the highest level of CSO engagement in Tanzania. The relatively negative response of Tanzanian CSOs to the second PRSP process does not encourage optimism for the future development of the process in Ethiopia. However other aspects of CSO advocacy experience in Tanzania and Central America provides a more positive model. As mentioned above, those Tanzanian CSOs dissatisfied with the PRSP process are not withdrawing from advocacy, rather than are shifting their focus to direct engagement with their own state institutions. Likewise in Central America, notwithstanding the history of political polarisation, CSOs are today more focused on engaging with the state and its policy forums that previously. While a substantial minority saw increased engagement with the state in negative terms, as a loss of social movement radicalism, the majority now see this form of institutional engagement as being necessary to advance a pro-poor agenda.⁴⁹

In engaging in advocacy with the state, Tanzanian civil society see networking as a source of strength, especially in dealing with a strong national government based on a dominant party with popular grassroots support. Only two CSOs in the entire sample were not members of at least one network and many were involved in multiple networks. National networks had a high level of recognition amongst civil society groups and were perceived to be legitimate and successful. In Central America, which has a dense set of CSO networks, there is concern that the focus on advocacy and consultation roles is resulting in the growth of narrowly-focused issue or sectoral networks rather than more generalist networks that have a broad anti-poverty focus. Issue networks are seen as more ‘professional’ sources of expert knowledge, fitting better into NGO consultative models, but ultimately less radical in that they cannot focus on the structural causes of poverty and inequality and often

⁴⁸ CIS, 2007e: 34.

⁴⁹ CIS, 2007f: 21.

cannot rely on a wide popular membership and support. In contrast to both Tanzania and Central America, the relative weakness of civil society in Ethiopia was expressed in a very low level of networking with less than half of all Ethiopian CSOs being a member of any civil society network – and just one organisation the Christian Relief and Development Association (CRDA) featured. The type of engagement with CRDA was of a very low level for most CSOs – essentially receiving information, rather than engaging in any strategic planning or mobilisation.⁵⁰

In Tanzania and Central America civil society is increasing in capacity and building its engagement with the state, through both institutionalised policy forums and more informal vehicles of advocacy and protest. While Ottaway and Carothers found little evidence of effective advocacy,⁵¹ here it is argued that in Tanzania and Central America there is clear evidence that groups utilising donor funding have built this capacity. In Ethiopia, where civil society organisation has not reached the level of the two other cases, there are a particular set of obstacles. Most prominent is the fractured nature of the state and the very tense relationship between government and opposition at national level. Civil society in this context has a much lower level of focus on advocacy at the level of national government, compared to their advocacy work aimed at local and regional government. There is also the issue of the comparatively low levels of aid received by Ethiopia, including aid for civil society, and the crowding out of local groups by INGOs who have operated in the country since the early 1980s with the acquiescence of successive governments who did not tolerate the emergence of strong, independent local civil society groups. This situation is improving and has the potential to change. Problematic as donor funding for civil society has been, across all three case studies it seems that the availability of these funds, pressure on the state to conform to international norms and a willingness amongst local CSOs to organise, is creating new relationships between state and civil society and opening up some space for effective advocacy.

⁵⁰ CIS, 2007e: 34-36.

⁵¹ Ottaway and Carothers, 2000.

Gender

In all the case studies, including Ethiopia where civil society was weakest, CSOs active in the area of gender were perceived to be comparatively successful. This finding supports those of Ottaway and Carothers who found that groups with a focus on gender issues were the only civil society success stories.⁵² In all three case studies, civil society organisations that focused on issues or services relevant to women made up a significant percentage of all groups. In Tanzania it was the primary focus of 22% of groups; in Ethiopia 37% of groups who engaged in advocacy did so on women's issues; in Central America 47% of organisations has a significant focus on women's issues, rising to over 50% in El Salvador and Nicaragua.

In Tanzania women's organisations are seen across civil society as particularly effective and well organised. In opened ended questions women's networks were placed in the top three most significant networks nationally. Women's activism rather than the presence of a significant number of women in parliament is credited with achieving policy reform favourable to women.⁵³ In Tanzania four issues surfaced as the most often-cited evidence for the positive impact of civil society advocacy - progress on gender reform, the SOSPA (Sexual Offences Special Provisions Act of 1998), MKUKUTA⁵⁴, and Land, listed in order of significance. Three of the four most-mentioned issues (Gender, SOSPA and Land) have obvious strong gender-related aspects, and gender was a key area in which civil society was considered to have influenced the MKUKUTA. The Tanzania Media Women's Association, was at the forefront of activism and advocacy that led ultimately to the SOSPA Act (sometimes also referred to as "the TAMWA Act").⁵⁵ This Act contains strong penalties for rape and domestic violence and also makes female genital mutilation of girls under age 18 a crime. The Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP) was believed to be influential in gender policy reforms generally, including the Gender Budget Initiative.

In Ethiopia, almost one third of all CSOs in the country engaged in advocacy (over 22% of all CSOs surveyed) are doing so on 'women's issues'. Notwithstanding the levels of gender inequality in Ethiopia this seems an extraordinarily high percentage. Of these groups engaged in advocacy on women's issues, one third of them are

⁵² Ottaway and Carothers, 2000.

⁵³ Women make up 30% of the national parliament, the majority via a reserved seats mechanism.

⁵⁴ MKUKUTA is the Kiswahili acronym for Tanzania's PRS revised in 2005, Mkakati wa Kukuza Uchumi na Kuondoa wa Umaskini Tanzania, translated as the National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty.

⁵⁵ CIS, 2007d: 29.

working in the relatively narrow area of ‘gender based violence’, currently a key area of donor interest.⁵⁶ This means that over 7% of the entire sample (a sample made up of a very diverse range of groups) were engaged in advocacy on ‘gender based violence’. If the groups engaged on advocacy on ‘harmful traditional practices’, included by some under ‘gender based violence’, are added then over 10% of the entire survey group are active in this area. This point is not intended to undermine the importance of advocacy on this issue, it is intended to stress that if Ethiopian civil society was setting its own agenda, it is unlikely that such a high percentage of groups would be clustered in this relatively narrow area of advocacy. Given the priority this topic has been given in donor agendas recently, especially following the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325⁵⁷, it suggests that civil society’s advocacy priorities are being influenced by donor funding. That is not to say that this is not a significant area for action, but that the resources for campaigning are being made available for those areas in which donors have an interest and are not perhaps being defined by the domestic priorities of indigenous women’s groups.

Table 2: Ethiopia – issues of focus for CSOs engaged in advocacy on women’s issues

	No of groups	% - of those engaged in advocacy on women’s issues	% of entire sample
Gender based violence	19	32%	7.1
Women empowerment	15	25%	5.6
Reproductive health	11	18%	4.1
HTP (Harmful traditional practices)	9	15%	3.6
Prostitution	6	10%	2.2
Total	60	100%	22.4

The existence of explicit international norms on gender, and a strong international network of women’s organisations, has undoubtedly assisted in channelling donor funds into these internationally defined priority areas. But isolating some of the distinguishing features of ‘women’s’ civil society organisations compared to civil society more generally highlights other factors that could explain the perceived success of these groups.

⁵⁶ O’Neill and Connolly, 2007.

⁵⁷ O’Neill and Connolly, 2007: 85-86.

The social movement basis of many women's organisations gives them a different character and structure to the majority of CSOs. It means they are more rooted in communities and networks of women. Another important aspect of their social movement foundation is that they have an ideological motivation for their activism, which makes them more effective agents of change, and also allows them to effectively interact with international women's networks, with whom they have a shared perspective. The UN provides an important site for this networking, as well as serving an agenda setting function.⁵⁸

Although Tanzania and Ethiopia did not experience 'second wave' feminism as a social force in the way it was experienced in developed states, women's activism has a long history. The independence movements in both African states, and the political parties which represented them, all had organised women's sections, which interacted with feminist based social movement activity. There was also a strong women's movement in the Derge era in Ethiopia which saw the establishment of network of women associations in the country. Given that these associations were formed within the prevailing ideology at the time many collapsed following the change of government in 1991 but they laid roots for the emergence of active advocacy on women issues in more favourable conditions. Similarly, women's organisations played a key role in the Tanzanian independence movement and, prior to the introduction of multiparty democracy, CCM had a substantial women's section, with a network of local groups. In Central America women's organisations played a key role in pro-democracy movements and in resistance to repressive states, as well as engaging in women's rights activism. This mobilisation of women, together with the limitations on women gaining influence in formal political and economic structures, after the transition to democracy in both states, has produced a strong motivation for women's civil society engagement. Policy norms in developed states have embedded, if only superficially, ideas of 'gender mainstreaming' and 'gender equality' into formal policy documents, including development policy, allowing some funding to be attached to these policy areas. As a result there has been a level of congruence between the existing CSOs with a focus on women's issues in developing states, a gender based funding stream in donor policy and international networks of women's rights activists, including INGOs, to facilitate the distribution of those funds. However, gender issues are still seen as marginal to the power relationships on which states and political systems are based. This has allowed states to adopt

⁵⁸ Exemplified by the strong and ongoing impact of the Beijing declaration; O'Neill And Connolly, 2007: 3.

gender reforms which are limited in their impact but which allow the states involved to project their image as modern and progressive.

Conclusion

The relationship between donor support and Southern civil society development remains problematic and complex. However, despite these problems, a combination of funding streams and international pressures has opened opportunities for the development of a particular form of civil society. The civil society that has emerged is not free from donor influence but neither is it a creation of donor policies. In order to exist, civil society organisations may have to adapt to international funding pressures to some extent, but this does not mean that they lack independent agency. While in Ethiopia, with the weakest level of civil society development, the areas of civil society activism were most skewed by donor agendas; in Tanzania, where civil society was stronger, the skewing of its agenda was less rather than more marked, despite the fact that it received more donor funding; and in Central America, where civil society is more deeply developed it has considerable autonomy from donor agenda's despite high levels of financial dependence on donors.

Civil society plays crucial roles in each of the three cases reviewed in this paper, essential for building democracy and pro-poor development. In Central America, civil society support is a potentially important vehicle for strengthening the still fragile democracies and for promoting more egalitarian public policies in societies where poverty is associated with deep inequality. In Tanzania, where, in common with many African states, there is no effective opposition party, civil society deepens public debate and provides an alternative voice in national decision making. In Ethiopia, civil society, though still weak, provides a vehicle for dialogue at local and regional level. This needs to be better resourced and perhaps has the potential to play a stronger role at national level, in a context where dialogue between government and political opposition is polarised and focused purely on the holding of political power. In each of the three cases civil society is playing a positive role and positive development outcomes would be achieved through a deeper engagement with civil society.

Across the three cases the comparative success of groups working on gender is the result of a number of factors. The presence of international norms on gender equality and gender based violence have provided a framework in which women's rights activists from both the developed and the developing world can lobby for the inclusion of policy commitments from donors and IFIs, and also to have funding attached to these commitments. The case study countries all have a long history of women's activism which provides the roots and personnel for the current array of women's rights based CSOs, which also have access to strong and supportive international networks, dealing with both the broad concerns of international women's rights and the more immediate concerns of gender and development. In addition, these networks are institutionally connected to the structures of the United Nations, giving them additional strength and legitimacy. This means that the activities of an individual CSO can take place within a support structure that can also act as a way of accessing funds. It also means that domestic advocacy is linked to international processes of advocacy and policy diffusion, which are neither primarily state nor donor led. In this way, the experiences of CSOs working on gender issues points to the importance of international networking as well as national networking for building successful advocacy. This point was also evident in the Central American study, where building CSO networks at the regional level was considered important in the face of new challenges to the region in the form of the free trade bloc, CAFTA-DR.

Policy on and funding for civil society amongst OECD donor states has shared a similar trajectory over the past five years. In spite of a policy position that validates the direct funding of Southern civil society, such funding has increased only marginally, from a very low base. Funding for Northern development NGOs has either been maintained or increased, with the almost universal requirement that these organisations move towards working through partner organisations in developing countries rather than through direct provision. There is evidence that there is a certain amount of donor fatigue on the issue of civil society funding and there is less emphasis on civil society in the 2006 DFID white paper, for example, compared to earlier documents.⁵⁹ This fatigue is driven by a wide range of factors including: criticism of the manner in which donors had engaged with CSOs; the very real difficulties of that engagement in particular around issues of CSO legitimacy and capacity; the high management costs to donors of funding lower capacity civil society groups; the apparent failure to achieve definite results; and the shift of focus in wider

⁵⁹ See DFID, 2006.

donor policy discourse towards a renewed emphasis on the role of the state and the governance agenda.

Irish Aid is unusual in that it has increased its focus on civil society during this period. A new civil society unit was established in 2002 and the following year the OECD peer review of Irish Aid argued that given Irish Aid's focus on bilateral aid to governments, a strong civil society programme would form a useful complement. Civil society dimensions were developed in country strategy papers and a new policy on engagement with civil society was published following a government white paper on Irish Aid in 2006. At the same time funding for Irish NGOs in particular has increased significantly, in line with the rapid growth in the overall budget for Irish Aid and most Irish NGOs are now increasing their focus on working with Southern CSOs. However in the context of the current dominance of the governance agenda, the role envisaged for civil society, even in Irish Aid, has become narrower and there is now a greater focus on upward accountability to donors on the part of both civil society and the state, with less emphasis being placed on the broader democratic, human rights and pro-poor roles of civil society.⁶⁰ Supporting a broader role of civil society was a strength of the Irish Aid programme and should remain an important part of their future practice.

A central plank of the governance agenda promoted by the World Bank is the PRSP process, which gives a significant place to civil society, or at least to a consultative process in which civil society is centrally involved. Southern civil society has however demonstrated its disenchantment with this process as it currently exists, while at the same time engaging in effective advocacy and mobilisation outside the PRSP process, through diverse avenues of engagement with their respective states. Harmonisation of policy amongst OECD donors contains the danger of emphasising the PRSP consultative role of Southern civil society (that CSOs consider less productive and more resource heavy) and also but to a lesser extent their small scale service provision, rather than their domestic advocacy and social mobilisation roles. This research clearly shows that Southern CSOs favour a broad approach to their work and are critical of the narrow range of donor interests and funding mechanisms. There is also evidence that Southern CSOs are successfully playing a more positive role in a wide range of poverty alleviation activity, including advocacy, than was suggested by the Carnegie Study of the late 1990s. Donors need to ensure that

⁶⁰ Connolly and O'Neill (2007 forthcoming)

support mechanisms for civil society support a broad range of organisations, with an emphasis on their broader role in poverty alleviation, development and democratisation, and not simply focus on narrowly defined consultation mechanisms.

Donors are criticised by those measuring aid effectiveness, if they engage in too many small projects, which together with the associated management burden of this type of funding makes the direct support of Southern civil society difficult and could lead to a reduction in commitments, or a failure to increase this aspect of aid as budgets increase. Donors need to continue to support a wide range of civil society groups in developing states. They should do this as direct funding for high capacity organisations and networks which can cope with their administrative requirements, and such organisations should be included in funding mechanisms on the same basis as INGOs, in addition to being supported through country strategy programmes. Supporting CSOs with lower levels of capacity and capacity building programmes will require the administration of large numbers of small grants and good local knowledge. No donor has developed successful mechanisms to deal directly with this type of support due to staffing restrictions and administrative pressures. This type of aid should be channelled through Northern development NGOs. The personnel practices and ethos of Northern NGOs make them better suited to this task. Many of the larger Irish development NGOs are already involved in capacity building programmes or have for many years worked through local partners. There is sufficient expertise in the sector to take on this role and the positive experience of the existing working relationships between Irish Aid and the NGO sector suggest this could be done effectively.⁶¹ This type of programme, aimed at lower capacity CSOs should exist in all programme countries and if it is to be carried out by INGOs this will require a greater degree of coordination between Irish Aid country strategy papers and the INGOs involved in this work in-country than has been normal up to now.

⁶¹ For full details on the wider research study which looked at the perspectives of Irish NGOs on Southern civil society and at their relationship with Irish Aid see CIS 2007c.

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