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Promotion of Civil Society in Developing Countries: the Example of European Development Cooperation

The promotion of civil society has become an important aspect of development cooperation. Most donors have set aside a part of their funds for this task, which is mainly carried out by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from donor countries. The European Commission has for a long time been pioneering the promotion of civil society in developing countries. The more democracy, human rights and good governance become central criteria of development cooperation, the more it is faced with the challenge of identifying more precisely the tasks, chances and risks of promoting civil society groups and of coming to an agreement on a meaningful division of labour.

- *The diversity of the functions of civil society and its significance for creating a framework conducive to development are still underrated. The promotion of civil society groups is indispensable if the goals of development cooperation are to be put into practice. Civil society organizations often emerge in the context of conflicts in society. These organizations help to break up decrepit structures, articulate the concerns of disadvantaged groups, and thus promote political participation. In so doing, they contribute to solving social conflicts and to monitoring government action.*
- *Despite all enthusiasm for the promotion of civil society in developing countries, potential risks must not be overlooked. In countries where the civil society is still weak, any outside interference has an impact on the development and the composition of civil society. The weaker the society is, the greater the risk that new conflicts emerge when select sections of the population are supported and social interests favoured.*
- *External promotion of civil society also requires sensibility because not all civil society activities are automatically conducive to development. Established interest groups, too, organize in a civil society format and block social change. Also, governments in developing countries often try to influence and control development processes in civil society for their own purposes. Development cooperation should not be misled by fake civil society organizations.*
- *The development of a diversified civil society is supported by a diversity of partner organizations from industrialized countries. Parallel promotion by NGOs, churches and trade unions, by human rights and environmental groups contribute to the emergence of a pluralist civil society. These players, too, must be aware that their activities might distort the development of civil society or create dependencies.*

The role of civil society in development

Diversity and activities of civil society players are a sign of self-organization capacities and pluralism within society. At the level of society as a whole, civil society players take on important functions in initiating discussion processes about the path of development, questioning government policies and enhancing the capacities within society for negotiation processes. The promotion of civil society may thus contribute to supporting democratization processes, fostering human rights and preventing conflicts. At the same time, the development of civil society presupposes that the state guarantee scopes for activities and development potentials, i.e. the rule of law, a minimum of respect of human rights and political participation.

Civil society has assumed a more comprehensive role over the last years to the extent that the problem-solving capacities of traditional players have diminished considerably and the planning euphoria of the 1950s and 1960s had to give way to a more realistic assessment of technocratic management potentials. This applies to both the government and the private

sector as well as to traditional associations and interest groups. (Development) processes of social change can be governed to a limited extent only due to the complex interaction between economic, political, social, and cultural factors. The hopes, burgeoning in the 80s, of providing a more suitable framework via deregulation and privatization have materialized only in part. It has become evident that instruments of market economy alone cannot ensure important functions of society, e.g. social integration, poverty alleviation, the rule of law, and a democratic environment. The role of the state, i.e. the precise definition of the functions of the state as compared to those of the market or other players in society, has thus become a central subject of development policy.

Still, the role of civil society and its function in the development process should not be underrated. It would be wrong to confine the significance of civil society players to the efficient and effective provision of services in those areas where government actions or the market are not sufficient, e.g. in the field of social policy.

A developed participatory and social democracy can be considered a prerequisite for development. The state must be in a position to provide a framework that ensures an operational market and important services that foster social cohesion. In this context civil society groups have a more comprehensive function: they mobilize the commitment of social groups in the development process. They articulate conflicts of interest, question government action and formulate alternative concepts. They speak up for the poor or disadvantaged social groups and thus contribute to the solution of conflicts in society.

However, civil society activities are not positive *per se*. Established interest groups – elites –, too, organize in a civil society format and thus hinder the development of democracy and the respect of human rights and block social change as a whole. Governments form their own "quangos" (quasi-nongovernmental organizations) or co-opt existing NGOs in order to counterbalance organizations that take a critical or emancipatory view of the government. Such instances can already be found in the field of human rights. Development policy which aims at promoting civil society in developing countries is thus faced with the task of selecting legitimated players from a broad range.

The term "civil society"

The term "civil society" emerged in the tradition of liberal thought going back to John Locke to describe society as distinct from the state. The term has thus developed from the old European tradition of distinguishing between state and society. The first civil society organizations grew out of the major social conflicts of the 19th century. But as varied needs and interests emerged with the increasing differentiation of society, a large number of so-called associations were founded, which have been found to foster democracy in two ways. As "countervailing powers," they prevent the centralization of state power, and as medium of political socialization they can become a "school of democracy." As the new social movements became stronger and many new organizations were founded, two further viewpoints emerged in the mid-seventies in the debate on the role of civil society organizations. First, "Third-Sector research" developed in the U.S., dealing with the relatively autonomous intermediate sector that had developed independent of the state and the market. The Third Sector has been defined to include not only initiatives, associations, and projects but also traditional interest groups and even public utilities. What developed in parallel was a more normative approach that uses the term "civil society" in an emancipatory way, viewing it as distinct from traditional associations and interest groups. While conservative and neoliberal definitions consider civil society to be more or less the same as self-reliance, thus equating it, not least, with entrepreneurship, it is a more narrow definition of "NGO" – and of "civil society organization" – that is becoming increasingly accepted at the international level (UN) and in social sciences. This definition refers to the emancipatory aspect and includes only organizations that are independent of the government and non-profit oriented. It is in this sense that the term "civil society" is used in this paper.

Development cooperation and the promotion of civil society in developing countries

It has become accepted in development policy that strengthening civil society is an essential prerequisite for sustainable development. Development cooperation programmes and projects can only be successful in a conducive political framework and if they are accepted by the target groups. Development cooperation must therefore deal with the general political and social environment in developing countries.

The participation of target groups has for a long time now been considered an important prerequisite for successful project planning. If target groups participate early on and people's initiative is mobilized, it becomes easier to identify the major requirements to be met by projects and programmes and to achieve a higher effectiveness. The active participation of civil society players also facilitate better results and greater sustainability at the level of larger programmes – all the way to the planning of sector policies – mainly because potential difficulties and resistance are taken into account right from the beginning.

What is more, the promotion of civil society in developing countries itself has become a goal of development cooperation. The promotion of civil society from outside helps to release potentials and to give opposition groups and social movements more scope of action. Yet it also involves risks. The development of civil society is distorted if an unsuitable organization is promoted or if the government's capacity to control civil society organizations is enhanced. Strengthening civil society must therefore be mindful of potential unintended effects. Now what are the appropriate roles of the various development cooperation players in promoting civil society? Three special advantages are ascribed to ENGOs (European nongovernmental organizations) compared to governmental organizations:

- Since they are especially close to grassroots organizations in developing countries, they can make effective use of self-help potentials, especially in the field of poverty reduction.
- The great diversity of donor organizations, with their various structures and focuses, is an indication of a potential for innovation which is the best guarantee that support to civil society in developing countries fosters a variety of groups and ideas.
- European nongovernmental development organizations generate public interest for development policy issues in their own countries, and the commitment of a multitude of volunteers has an even broader appeal. The acceptance for the work of ENGOs among the public has a positive overall impact on the credibility of development policy.

In selecting partner organizations, account must also be taken of the effects of funding on the development of civil society itself, which can be distorted if extensive funds are provided to unsuitable players. The promotion of suitable civil society players also requires careful planning since promotion has a direct impact on the players themselves. Four aspects should be taken into account as cooperation partners are selected:

- Civil society activities can be harmed through excessive financing, for instance by discouraging volunteerism, by corruption, but also by creating financial dependencies between civil society players that do not have the same access to outside funding. Both governmental and nongovernmental promotion schemes must take this point into consideration.
- If funding is provided under decentralized cooperation – the direct funding of Southern civil society organizations through the EU –, recipient states have a right of veto with regard to its utilization. The allocation of funding to civil society players can thus be used by government to influence civil society development in accordance with their political aspirations. However, larger NGOs in developing countries consider direct promotion by government donors a way of becoming more independent of the influence of too dominant partner NGOs. Yet if allocation of funding within civil society in developing countries is organized by large national NGOs, similar dependency relationships can emerge within civil society at the national level.
- If civil society groups are rather weak, cooperation with NGOs is helpful – for one because of NGOs' experience with project implementation and also with a view to protecting civil society players against state intervention and persecution.
- In countries where tensions between the state and civil society exist, direct promotion within the framework of decentralized cooperation is highly problematic and hardly recommendable unless it can bypass the repressive state apparatus. Especially in countries where the political oppression of civil society organizations has become the rule, such type of cooperation can increase the personal risks for civil society activists and committed citizens. At the same time, there is a high risk that the state exerts unwanted influence on the development of civil society.

Decentralized cooperation should always make sure that well-functioning relations between NGOs from the North and civil society organizations in developing countries are neither replaced nor made redundant. Donor competition for suitable recipient organizations should be avoided, in particular in those countries where civil society is still weak.

Promotion of civil society by European development cooperation

The European Commission funded the promotion of civil societies in developing countries, well before other donors did. In 1976 the Commission established a cofinancing budget line for NGOs. Moreover, NGOs have received more than 1,000 million ECU for cofinancing projects in developing countries (1996: 155 million ECU) and for sensitization campaigns for development issues in Europe (1996: 18.2 million ECU). In addition, NGOs play an important part in implementing EU programmes in Asia and Latin America as well as programmes of the European Development Fund.

There are now a number of further budget titles on which NGOs may draw. The most important ones

are food aid (NGO share in 1996: 111.2 million ECU) and humanitarian aid handled by the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) (NGO share in 1996: about 46 % = 301 million ECU). The sum total of EU aid spent via NGOs has doubled from on average of 378 million ECU between 1986 and 1990 to almost 800 million ECU between 1991 and 1995. In 1996 ENGOS received a total of 703.6 million ECU.

Support for NGO activities basically comes in two forms: First, the Commission provides supplementary funding for ENGOS' own projects and programmes under the "cofinancing" scheme, with ENGOS having the right of initiative and bearing full responsibility for implementation. Second, the Commission may appoint ENGOS just like consulting firms and charge them with providing certain services (such as humanitarian aid). In addition to cofinancing via ENGOS, the Commission is now also giving direct support to civil society organizations in developing countries. "Decentralized cooperation" has become an autonomous component of the EU cooperation policy after it was introduced in the Lomé IV Convention, and has also been added to the cooperation programmes with the Mediterranean, Latin American and Asian countries.

Although all players involved are agreed to a great extent on the significance of promoting civil society in developing countries, there is still considerable need for discussion on how projects and programmes should be designed and which player should assume which role:

(1) Consulting trend

Responsibilities for development policy in the Commission are scattered among many offices. The situation is similar in the field of NGO promotion. Under the budget lines issued by Directorate General I, the Commission tends towards drawing upon ENGOS as consulting firms for the sake of simplifying administration. In this case ENGOS must follow strict regulations and cannot work for development aims of their own. If ENGOS as contractors are treated like consulting firms, there is the risk that the specific character and thus the advantages of ENGOS activities are lost.

These include direct access to a number of partners – especially the close contacts of ENGOS to grassroot organizations, which governmental organizations can hardly establish –, the creation of public interest for development policy issues, their innovation potential which increases along with the activities of a growing number of players, and, not least, the funds of ENGOS. Another advantage of ENGOS activities, which should not be underestimated, is that the social and political commitment of these organizations as well as the motive of solidarity, under which they act, contribute to the continuity and effectiveness of cooperation.

(2) Tension between coordination and diversity

Since the 1980s, development cooperation as a whole has become more strategic. It focuses more on reforming the macroeconomic framework and sector policies. Based on the guiding principles of *coordina-*

tion and complementarity, the Commission is simultaneously trying to improve coordination of its development cooperation programmes with those of the Member States, and to match the best-suited players with the tasks to be performed. In this context, ENGOs have only been playing a minor part thus far. While ENGOs are actively involved in the development of country strategies and sector policies in some of the Member States, such involvement only exists to a limited extent at the EU level.

Administrative problems in EU development cooperation

The funding available for ENGOs has continually risen over the last ten years, whereas the number of officers in charge of NGO funding at the Commission has barely increased. This leads to delays in processing applications for cofinancing. The difficulties of the administration in dealing with applications with a low financial volume, in particular from smaller NGOs, encourage discussions within the Commission about professionalizing financing, i.e. giving more contracts to consulting firms. A simplification of the still very complex application procedures has for a long time been under discussion, first steps in this direction are expected in the second half of 1999. Another consideration is to reduce the number of working languages in the field of cofinancing. If, for instance, German or Italian were no longer used, cofinancing applications from smaller or medium NGOs from the countries concerned would have no chance.

All trends indicated point to the risk that small and medium NGOs will find it more difficult to get access to EU funding. This would not only be a problem for Member States with mainly small NGOs (e.g. in Italy), but also prove counterproductive as regards the actual goal, i.e. promoting the full range of civil society organizations in developing countries. Having a large number of diverse European donor NGOs is presumably more appropriate in this context than concentration on a few large ENGOs.

The Commission has for some time now been urging ENGOs to become actively involved in the dialogue on strategy planning for development cooperation and to base their work on the guiding principles developed in that context. In response, ENGOs have voiced their concern that their scope for action becomes narrower if they engage in the planning process of EU country programmes. It is the diversity of development cooperation instruments and their special access to civil society groups in developing countries that ENGOs consider an aim in itself. To bridge the gap between useful coordination on the one hand and a diversity of promotion approaches on the other, solutions will have to be found that take account of both sides.

(3) Decentralized cooperation

Another subject under discussion is the direct promotion of civil society organizations in developing countries by the EU. It is above all ENGOs that are sceptical of this approach. Their main argument is that EU funding implies close cooperation with the administration and government of the recipient country, which, in turn, would favour pro-government civil society groups while opposition or anti-government groups would be left empty-handed. ENGOs maintain that funding of civil society groups by nongovernmental partners makes more sense. Their view is backed by some Member States that urge a stronger division of tasks among the various players of European development cooperation and want to restrict the role of the Commission in the sense of subsidiarity.

Decentralized cooperation seems to be an advantage when it comes to the promotion of new forms of cooperation between civil society organizations, local authorities, and central-state bodies. Difficulties emerge where the national political culture is such that relations between the state and civil society are dysfunctional or problematic, especially if civil society players risk being put in a position of dependency or even face risks of their personal safety. This is where ENGOs have comparative advantages. They have direct access to local civil society players; they can avoid problems related to government control, domination or security. Moreover, they are in a position to foster the potential for advocacy in favour of local civil society organizations that are opposed to the government. If the European Commission is to encourage decentralized cooperation more, ENGOs, too, should accept new tasks or review some of their own roles and functions. A future role might focus on providing advice to civil society players in developing countries.

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Additional Readings

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