

Civil Society Perspectives on the Paris Declaration and Aid Effectiveness

Kasturi Sen, October 2007

While civil society organisations (CSOs) were present during the signing of the Paris Declaration in March 2005, there have been growing concerns about the lack of an active civil society role in the process, to ensure that aid effectiveness can be measured in relation to its actual impact on the ground in alleviating poverty and improving livelihoods of poor and marginalised communities. Whilst this is of foremost priority there is also keen interest among civil society to ensure that budget allocations are not utilised to remove further the goals of human rights, democracy and sustainable development that includes a focus on gender equality.

The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness¹ signed in March 2005 is in theory a comprehensive approach to reforming and streamlining overseas development assistance (ODA). However, as far as civil society is concerned, the Paris Declaration (PD) is essentially an agreement between donors and recipient governments that needs to be monitored carefully to ensure that the long standing concerns of CSOs about the past failures of the

aid system are not ignored; particularly at this critical juncture when national and international consultations are taking place in preparation for the high level meeting in Ghana in September 2008. INTRAC has been closely involved in facilitating dialogue between civil society and donors. This briefing paper highlights some of the current and past concerns of CSOs about what it means for aid to be really effective.

Civil society response to the PD has been discussion, comment and appraisal intended to feed into the monitoring and assessment processes initiated in 2006. Some reactions to the PD have been constructive; others remarkably sceptical. In examining its potential impact it is important to note the recent nature of the PD process, the complexity of the proposed changes, the plethora of monitoring mechanisms and instruments and the time required for analysis. Many civil society-led discussions are ongoing and their results are not yet in the public domain. This paper summarises some of the key concerns raised by both Northern and Southern CSOs that are currently available.

¹ www1.worldbank.org/harmonization/Paris/FINALPARISDECLARATION.pdf

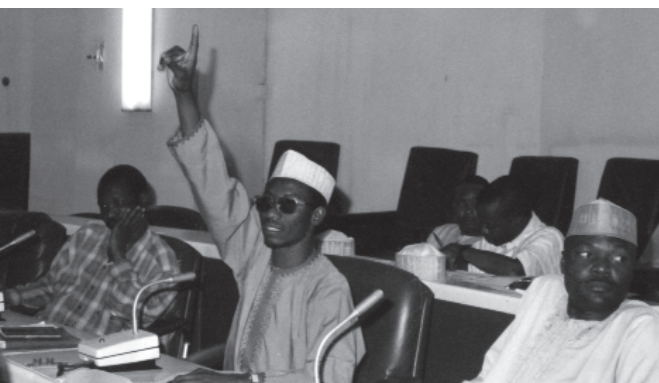
In general civil society concerns over the PD focused on three main areas:

- 1.** First and foremost, there is concern about the structure of the aid disbursement process (e.g. tied aid and aid conditionality). Many civil society groups and NGOs are concerned that old structures of aid provision will not have altered and will continue to perpetuate unequal and discriminatory policies towards the poor.
- 2.** Second, there is major concern as to the absence of civil society voice and role in making governments accountable and transparent, given the legacy of closed door discussions and the struggles to be heard under previous regimes of aid policy.
- 3.** Third, there is anxiety over the vagueness of some of the existing indicators to measure the effectiveness of the PD and the lack of steady progress towards mainstreaming gender equality and human rights. These are at risk due to the technical and often abstract language of the existing Paris Agenda and its focus on mechanism rather than actual impact and outcome.

To many CSOs, the PD is also not sufficiently focused on dealing with past failures of the aid system. CSOs, in both the North and South, fear progress may be hindered because past conditionality continues to remain alongside the call for greater national ownership. Examples include conditions that enforce disbursement of funds in accordance with donor priorities, such as the liberalisation of trade and the privatisation of essential services. This together with the persistence of tied aid (ensuring that a large share of aid is spent on imported goods and services from the donors) are viewed as a major hindrance to any progress towards aid effectiveness (Oxfam International/Action Aid 2006). Many civil society groups and their representatives have argued that the rhetoric of ownership is belied by the way civil society is excluded from participation in how budgets are allocated or managed (Pratt, Ontrac 33 2006, Gadnet 2006). There is a much greater focus on reducing transaction costs than

on ensuring aid benefits marginalised communities. Exclusive emphasis on donor country negotiations on implementation wrongly assumes that governments are always democratic and representative or that they can guarantee political stability (Pratt, Ontrac 33). This approach is particularly ominous for many Southern CSOs at risk of closure or censorship at a time when security considerations are foremost in the minds of governments, thus overshadowing policies to address poverty and improve livelihoods (Ontrac 35: 2006; Menocal and Rogerson 2005). Strengthening of the powers of the executive under the current security agenda is a major concern for CSOs and has generated major distortions to the development agenda, nationally and internationally. There is growing fear that current proposals under the PD are likely to encourage even democratically-elected governments to act punitively and without accountability (VANI 2006). There is evidence that countries as far apart as India, Uzbekistan and Russia may already have done so (VANI/INTRAC 2006, unpublished, Asian Human Rights Commission 2006). This is a particular concern among many Southern CSOs at the front line of development practice.

Amidst such wide-ranging concerns, many NGOs and CSOs are arguing that the visible exclusion of civil society voice and participation necessitates creation of a parallel civil society-led system to monitor the progress of the Paris Agenda and that there should be a civil society-only forum at the next high level meeting to assess PD progress, in Ghana in 2008 (Eurodad, March 2007). The parallel forum will be focused on holding donors and recipient government to account on the principles of the Paris Agenda, as well as scrutinising the current monitoring process being undertaken through country level surveys. These activities would be undertaken in conjunction with the ongoing, active and critical engagement among many CSOs and NGOs with the development process (CCIC 2006; PRIA 2006; Pratt 2006). An international civil society steering group has been established and is working to address key issues of concern to civil society, at the Accra High Level Forum. There are also suggestions from some Northern CSOs that urgent dialogue with donors and recipient governments may be the best way forward (Gender-net, GADN 2007, Bond 2007). In a comment



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on the PD, Action Aid and Oxfam International lean towards the former view, that without consideration of the progress achieved in government–civil society partnerships in development – the Paris process rather than being a milestone could easily dissolve into a ‘millstone’ that fails the poor (Action Aid/Oxfam International 2006).

There is also concern among Southern CSOs that there is a divergence of opinion between Northern and Southern NGO–CSO perspectives on the context of the PD. Northern NGOs are concerned about issues relating to governance, such as ownership and accountability. Southern agencies at the frontline of development practice are faced with issues of values and principles such as unchanging conditionality, promotion of market-oriented policies that damage the lives of poor people, and entrenched inequalities in the distribution of income and resources and trends towards authoritarianism (CCIC 2006, Sen, Ontrac 35).

Gender Issues – Calling for Reassessment and Entry Points

Gender networks have voiced concern about the potential loss of dialogue with governments when gender issues are incorporated into poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs). Lack of clarity and marginalisation of civil society voice could undo progress on incorporating a gender dimension in the aid effectiveness agenda, an unfortunate development when the majority of the world’s poor – in terms of income and asset ownership – are women. Most gender analysts, in both CSOs and state development agencies, note that there is limited inclusion of gender in the wider aid effectiveness agenda. PRSPs and measures to implement the MDGs reveal poor understanding of gender issues. Policies often lack evidence and weight and undermine goals to ensure gender equality nor be able to address issues of disparities between rich and poor, men and women.

Those who work on cross-cutting PRSP-related policy issues are concerned that gender equality risks being sidelined, unless there

is visible commitment in budgets and plans for action. There are areas where opportunities for influence remain: the Working Party for Aid Effectiveness (WP-EFF) and four Joint Ventures could offer entry points for influencing gender and social policy when there are reports back to donors at the meeting in Ghana in 2008. Progress reports could nudge policies to be more gender-sensitive, especially at country level. Gender-net members are encouraged by the Irish Aid critique (Gaynor 2006) to forge partnership at Working Party and at Country level in order to access all potential entry points to influence the Paris Declaration and to contribute to the Third High Level Forum, planned for the Ghana meeting.

Some but not all gender alliances (Gender-net, Gender and Development Network (GADN)) appear focused on dialogue with governments and donors. At the International Dialogue Conference on the Paris Declaration organised by the civil society centre of the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) in August 2006², there was debate about whether it was appropriate to engage with a pre-determined process that largely excluded civil society. Some participants argued a select group of technocratic administrators had taken ownership of the Paris Agenda and were focused on mechanistic aid delivery. The meeting – which consisted mainly of northern NGOs and representatives of official Swedish official agencies – agreed on the need to ensure inclusion of civil society as equal partners in the development process.

Challenging the Current Premise

The Sida conference concluded with the election of a civil society ambassador to voice and monitor the concerns of civil society and highlight the ambivalence felt by most participants on the PD, especially those representing Southern CSOs and NGOs. There was criticism of the lack of learning from past approaches and the tendency of the World Bank and IMF, in defiance of PRSP rhetoric, to exclude the needs and concerns of the poor and the marginalised. It was also suggested, particularly by Swedish CSOs, that whilst the Paris Agenda might strengthen

national ownership, its approach was not new, for Swedish CSOs and official aid mechanisms have always strived towards goals of ownership, harmonisation, alignment and accountability in their developing country partnerships. Swedish CSOs wanted the Paris Agenda to be part of the already established and agreed MDGs, rather than creating new aid mechanisms.

Organisations such as PRIA (Society for Participatory Research in Asia) and INTRAC supported the call for an alternative CSO dialogue to create parallel civil society partnerships in development and ensure a civil society watchdog role. They argued that the language of the PD, especially that of governance and accountability, could not be achieved without including civil society's experience of results-based and poverty-focused approaches to development. INTRAC has argued that efficiency does not necessarily lead to effectiveness and that the value of indicators needed to be based on results, rather than simply on the management of development. INTRAC has also suggested that the terminology of the PD risked CSOs becoming subcontractors rather than development partners. Concern was voiced over missing elements in the PD and confusion between administrative efficiency and programme effectiveness. PRIA argued that the current aid effectiveness agenda marginalises civil society and that the broader governance agenda should not be reduced simply to calls for improved public administration of aid. INTRAC has argued that governments are not always capable of deciding what is best for their citizens and need to work closely with civil society to understand the priorities and concerns of isolated communities far from the capitals where budget priorities are set. Christian Aid has criticised the failure to change existing aid structures and challenge bias towards donor interests.³ Oxfam and Action Aid are critical of the continuing tied nature of aid and call for greater accountability and less conditionality. They urge use of countries' own systems to build capacity and an end to policy conditions that reinforce economic dependence. World Vision, as signatory to a petition sent to the OECD/DAC, has argued that the PD is unclear about instruments for civil society voice and that the twelve indicators

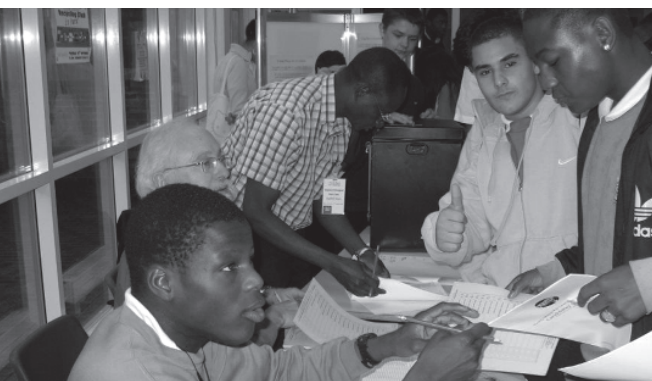
intended for effective monitoring would work largely in favour of donors, rather than countries in receipt of aid. In similar vein, Southern civil society partners have raised many concerns, some of which coincide with views held by Northern NGOs about conditionality, donor 'interest' blocks that pressure recipient governments, lack of transparency over monitoring and evaluation of country progress and failure to monitor donor performance. The main call from the conference was for donors not to simply endorse the IMF and World Bank's hegemonic poverty alleviation agenda, but instead to work on specific sectors to ensure focus and quality.

Reassess Indicators and Performance Assessment Frameworks

Numerous civil society groups have voiced concerns about the way the Paris process is monitored. The UK Aid Network (UKAN), a collection of UK based NGOs,⁴ has noted lack of civil society representation and suggested the value of the PD can be judged mainly by its ability to translate its principles into action. This can be assured only if civil society is acknowledged on all national development plans in order to ensure ownership, participation and accountability. In a letter to the chair of the DAC in April 2006, UKAN made a number of recommendations on the use of indicators, and for example called for a qualitative assessment of performance based on results achieved by donors and partner countries. They suggested that overemphasis on the operational dimensions of the aid effectiveness agenda may distract from social policy and accountability. There is a risk the PD could end up being akin to the Country Development Frameworks prepared by the World Bank, during the earlier phase of PRSP. UKAN suggests adding to existing indicators and argues the need for greater flexibility in monitoring relationships and results so as to include the voices of a broader spectrum of society and not simply the contractual parties. This would allow a focus on results, rather than on processes alone and would encourage a multi dimensional approach to addressing issues of poverty and inequality, citizens rights and the accountability of governments.

3 www.eurodad.orh/articles/default.aspx?id=749

4 www.bond.org.uk/policy/ukan.htm



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Overhaul the current Aid System for Impact on Poverty and Inequality?

There is a clear danger that unless several Paris Agenda objectives are clarified, apparently consultative and participatory processes could end up being fragmentary, mechanistic and futile. This fear was endorsed by CCIC, a coalition of Canadian NGOs⁵, who voiced fears that current discourse is state-centric and ignores civil society concerns. Drawing on consultations with CSOs in the North and the South the CCIC urges focus on five key points; civil society participation; ownership; alignment and harmonisation and mutual accountability. The CCIC has argued that it is essential for the Paris Agenda not to align itself uncritically with country poverty reduction strategies, since these have been problematic from the outset with conditionalities set by international financial institutions and calls for a profound reform of the aid regime and conditions of trade and aid. Aid conditionality, they argue, is an ongoing reality, leading CSOs to question whether donors are really 'external actors' or have simply become adherents of state-led policies. The CCIC wants to ensure participation and empowerment of poor people (and not simply of their representatives) but argues this can only take place through democratic negotiation and the parliamentary process. Since the roots of poverty are closely related to inequalities these must be addressed by the Paris Agenda. The Canadian coalition argues that one of the main problems of the aid effectiveness agenda is that the underlying power relations and the politics of development are ignored. The attempt to implement an aid agenda as a technical process will cover up the power dynamics that are contained within the whole aid architecture. Agreements hatched behind closed doors between donors and states cannot be classified as consensus and representative of citizen interests. CCIC calls for democratic participation, transparency and accountability, not just in relation to eradicating poverty, but also with regard to governments' human rights obligations that risk being ignored.

Adding to this call, the Commonwealth Foundation hosted a meeting of representatives of Commonwealth CSOs in Sri Lanka, in 2006, which reiterated support for the MDGs and civil society's role in their achievement. They argued that aid effectiveness should focus on improving the lives of poor people and realising their rights to employment, quality essential services and protection against poverty-induced vulnerabilities.⁶

Dangers of Repeating Past Mistakes in Aid Disbursement

The arguments of the CCIC are reiterated in a recent statement by 26 NGOs belonging to the Reality of Aid Global Network (ROA/GN).⁷ They call on donors to be bold in their vision and commitment to aid effectiveness. They argue that the PD as currently constituted is likely to lead to aid that yet again fails to reach those most in need, precisely because it does not clarify how donor aid will be untied, nor how developing country capacity and good governance will be built. A number of indicators remain vague. Governments need a results-based approach to aid effectiveness through commitment to a set of meaningful time-bound targets and rigorous country-level monitoring and reporting.⁸ They note with concern the absence of reforms within IFIs and the overall aid system, failure to untie aid and the low volumes of 'real aid' – conditionality-free, and non-tied. They cite figures that a mere 40-45% of bilateral aid remains untied and urge the need to learn from successes in the PRSP process in order to make it work better, rather than creating new initiatives through the PD. The Group argues that PRSPs had the advantage of enabling some countries, particularly in Africa, to set up effective participatory forums. These should continue under the Paris Agenda with support from multilateral and bilateral donors, civil society, governments and parliamentarians.

⁵ www.ccic.ca

⁶ [www.commonwealthfoundation.com/uploads/documents/CIVIL_SOCIETY_STATEMENR2006_24_JULY_-Final .doc](http://www.commonwealthfoundation.com/uploads/documents/CIVIL_SOCIETY_STATEMENR2006_24_JULY_-Final.doc)

⁷ www.realityofaid.org/

Monitoring Quality of PRSPs under Direct Budget Support

In a recent report another NGO consortium, Direct Budget Support (DBS), examined the implications of the aid effectiveness agenda for NGOs in three countries in sub-Saharan and East Africa. Many of the concerns they highlight reflect wider civil society anxieties about the aid effectiveness agenda, especially the quality of consultations with civil society on poverty reduction strategies. The report argues that while the consultation process in all three countries led to some positive changes in the quality of participation, there were serious concerns about the mechanisms used. Gains identified were overshadowed by the failure of governments to take civil society voice seriously, and by their exclusion from the decisions on budget allocations. This reinforced mutual existing suspicions between state and civil society. Hence many of the gains of participation were undermined by the nature of implementation of agreed parameters for cross sector policies and poverty targets. DBS argued there was far too much upward accountability (to donors), and too little downward accountability towards civil society, thus reinforcing already existing powerful donor blocks in each country assessed. The focus on executive negotiations in DBS has tended also to marginalise parliaments. Focus on administrative efficiency and current performance tends to de-contextualise the process from its immediate past and in particular, the legacy of already existing mechanisms. This highlights the urgent need for public scrutiny, not only of NGOs but just as importantly of donors and recipient governments.

Critics contend that the current focus of donors is disproportionately on NGO accountability. This may provide a pretext for not providing accountability for all sides in the development process – that is both recipient governments and donors. There is a strong perception that it is not only states but also donors who are sidelining NGOs in the consultation process over national strategies and country plans. Offices of development agencies, including DfID country offices, are treating NGOs as an ‘add-on’ rather than as equal partners.

Among the many recommendations of the Eurodad report, the key ones deal with the need for meaningful participation with civil society over the aid effectiveness agenda, the urgent need for public scrutiny through parliament and through NGOs of the accounting and budgeting processes and the need for donors to consult NGOs when developing country plans and reviewing civil society funding instruments. The report urges donors to maintain flexibility in their funding options, rather than approach the aid effectiveness agenda with absolute uniformity.

The main dilemmas about the aid effectiveness agenda raised by civil society are summarised by Laverne and Wood (2006) and focus on three main principles. First, the need for commitment to continuing the fight against poverty and under-development in low- income countries. Secondly, that the agenda has to acknowledge the need to learn from shared lessons of what is known to work in the struggles against poverty and inequality. Thirdly, it is vital that the aid effectiveness agenda go beyond statements of principles to include targeted commitments to addressing the causes of poverty and inequality. An understanding of these causes and subsequent targets should be based on a broad consensus and not simply on the basis of donor-government relationships. A focus on state building alone is likely to be counterproductive and detract from building strong partnerships between state and civil society based on mutual respect and democratic accountability (DRC 2006). The ability to promote a needs and rights-based approach to the voice of the poor and the excluded needs not only monitoring but also dialogue and consensus building.

If the process of implementation is dominated by a rigid, mechanistic and seemingly technical approach that is focused on planning, programming, public financial management and procurement it will inevitably lead to the removal from the agenda of local political realities and complexities, and preclude discussion of issues such as human rights and entitlement. This would risk further alienating aid effectiveness from meaningful local ownership and relegating civil society to the sidelines. It is

8 See: <http://realityofaid.org/themeshow.php?id=37>



Effective states depend on empowered citizens, and donor policy should strengthen the role of active citizens. (DRC, IDS 2006)

thus essential to ensure a coherent approach at an early stage, in order ensure that the different agents of development each have a strategic role to play in implementing a truly meaningful and effective aid agenda. An acknowledgment of this important principle requires foresight as well as insight into interests, power relations, values, knowledge and access to information of each (of the development partners). The aid effectiveness agenda must serve the interest of all groups in society and include social policy.

Civil society critiques of the current aid effectiveness agenda suggest that donors have adopted a very technocratic approach to implement effectiveness. They focus, it is alleged, on efficiency rather than effectiveness. The emphasis on 'efficiency' has the danger of excluding development that includes justice for poor people, social inclusion (including the rights of migrants and refugees who are a growing element of the population of many countries), the rights of women, the elderly and people with disabilities, all of whom are left off the agenda. There is evidence that disempowered groups rarely benefit from either targeted or vertical policies (Sigamany, Ontrac 33). A strong emphasis on quantifiable outputs, most argue, is therefore likely to lead to failed policies. The Gender-net groups have cogently argued that focus needs to be on cross-sector policies e.g. not simply on education, water and sanitation or MCH, but rather on justice, employment, access to credit – needs of poor people that cannot be met through single quantifiable mechanisms. The Paris Agenda in its current form is geared to linear movement, whether the state in a particular context is weak in capacity or in a position of strength. Therefore, it is only through dialogue with a variety of groups that states can become more capable and accountable. The current planned mode of delivery is likely to lead to greater exclusion and the suppression of voices that are critical of target-led approach to development.

In sum, the range of concerns of civil society groups over both the PD and aid effectiveness is focused on ownership, accountability and the need to ensure democratic participation. The absence of civil society inclusion and engagement indicates a lack of political will and commitment to social participation from donors. It has been repeatedly argued that this is likely to lead to an exclusion of already marginalised groups in many countries of the developing world – women (who comprise 70 percent of the world's poor), the elderly, people with disabilities and the chronically ill. Existing structures of aid disbursement are also viewed as being unjust and dysfunctional and likely to reinforce growing disparities between the rich and poor. They may also contribute further to jobless growth, and further the lack of prioritisation of pro-poor budget allocations. Strong concerns have also been voiced from a range of civil society actors about the lack of continuity in policy from earlier and

major initiatives such as the PRSPs and the MDGs. Agencies such as the Commonwealth Foundation are calling for a reinstatement of commitment to both of these to ensure that the success stories of these policies in terms of civil society-government participation and dialogue are not lost. Civil society actors highlight issues relating to gender poverty and human rights. They are fundamentally concerned about the instrumental nature of the aid effectiveness agenda, which, they argue, is overly focused on administrative and bureaucratic processes, rather than real transformations to the lives of the poor.

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About INTRAC

INTRAC, the International NGO Training and Research Centre, publishes briefing papers on policy developments that affect the work of civil society organisations worldwide. The current briefing papers, funded by Swedish development agency Sida, deal with two main topics from a civil society perspective: the securitisation of development and the 'War on Terror', and the Paris Declaration and aid effectiveness agenda.

Over 2006/07, INTRAC ran a series of workshops on the role of counter-terrorism measures in international development. These were held in Central Asia, the Middle East, Europe, South Asia, North America, and among the Somali diaspora in Europe. Many of the issues we discuss in these briefing papers were first raised by our workshop partners and participants.

Briefing papers 1-9 can be accessed for free online at: www.intrac.org/pages/policy_briefing_papers.html

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