

## viewpoint

### Civil society and aid – where now?

Civil society predates and is likely to outlive the aid industry; it is intrinsic to successful societies and states. Therefore two questions should be put up front – how does the aid industry support civil society in its long-term role of counterbalancing and complementing the state and representing the views and activities of citizens? How does the aid industry (both official agencies and NGOs) work in such a way as to ensure they are building sustainable capacity in civil society and not undermining it?

With increasing concerns about the aid industry ignoring the lessons of history, or simplifying development to a few indicators barely related to long-term development, we have to look to the future and establish a vision for both NGOs and official donors which has a realistic and politically aware concept of the contexts in which development takes place, as well as a more realistic view of their own roles. There is as much scope for damage to developing communities as there is scope for positive action. As we move towards 2015 it becomes more likely that the big challenges of chronic enduring poverty, unequal distribution of wealth and resources, climate change and insecurity will require new approaches from the aid industry. These approaches must place local people at the centre of this vision. Governments claim to be doing this through the Paris Declaration, but civil society is still treated as a poor relative or is too often confused with development and relief NGOs, divorced from the social fabric of a country, region or community.

Yes there will be challenges to civil society groups, especially NGOs who will need to rediscover new sources of financial support, and some staff will be lost to the sector. However, this is met by



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the growth of volunteering as more people have time and resources to devote scarce skills in a voluntary manner to their own communities. This trend is being replicated elsewhere and reflects a mood where many on the ground are perhaps looking to a future beyond donors.

INTRAC's recent programme in Cyprus, for example, was characterised by training with local partners which tended to be held in the evenings as most groups on the island are run by volunteers. The degree to which this will work can only be tested over time.

We want however to avoid copying the model of multilateral companies and assuming that civil society can be strengthened by the continued growth of multilateral NGOs.

These NGOs might bring all forms of support to local people but they are not contributing to local civil society any more than multilaterals led to the growth of local businesses except as sub-contractors and suppliers.

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## Contents

### viewpoint

Civil society and aid – where now? ...	1
Is civil society in retreat?.....	2
Civil society-donor partnerships – current and future prospects.....	3
The absence of citizens in fragile states .....	5
Civil society in the Middle East: Historical and regional context .....	6

### In this issue:

We consider how the aid industry can better support civil society. Brian Pratt argues that more effective support will require new approaches that place local people at the centre, whilst Katie Wright and Lucy Earle examine the case of less publicised civil society actors working at the margins. This is followed by an interview with the UK Department for International Development's (DFID) new Permanent Secretary, Minouche Shafik, examining the roles that civil society organisations play and how these are likely to change in the future.

Kasturi Sen next explores the need to better engage civil society in fragile states through more meaningful dialogue. Finally Valli Yanni outlines some of the core challenges for civil society in the Middle East.

This ONTRAC issue is a prelude to INTRAC's forthcoming conference in December 2008 which will re-examine the concept and role of civil society, focusing on its significance in relation to current debates and practice in development.

## Is civil society in retreat?

With recent shifts in the aid architecture, there are signs that the potential contribution that civil society organisations can make to development is being undermined. First, the increasing failure by donors and governments to include civil society as a visible partner in development is reflected in current aid policy. The Paris Declaration and aid effectiveness agenda have largely failed to include civil society on equal terms.

The evidence gleaned by INTRAC (DFID 2007, Ibis 2008) suggests that civil society groups have only been allowed to perform a very limited and uniform role, with their scope for influence in terms of advocacy and empowerment subordinated to sub-contracting relationships through service delivery. Civil society organisations themselves have also been slow to recognise the implications of the aid effectiveness agenda – many are simply aligning their own strategies so closely with those of donors that, according to some observers, they risk losing their roots (Hulme and Edwards 1997).

### The aid industry needs to focus on and engage with less publicised civil society actors

The current security agenda has pushed many civil society organisations into ‘defensive mode’ where they become risk averse (INTRAC 2007). INGOs are increasingly under pressure in the context of national security measures, leading to more strained relationships with southern partners. Similarly, civil society organisations engaged in advocacy work are under increasing pressure. The security agenda is often used as a smokescreen for clamping down on civil society organisations by repressive states (such as in Bangladesh or Central Asia) as well as those claiming to be democratic (Sen and Morris 2008).

In this context it is of little surprise that civil society organisations (and particularly NGOs) are being forced into retreat or, in the case of INGOs, they are merging so closely with donors that the difference between them and national governments is becoming so imperceptible that their relevance is being questioned. Despite this

seemingly gloomy prospect, there are new trends and actors which challenge conventional perceptions of civil society organisations. Among these are social movements and faith-based organisations which have broken away from the traditional mould described above. The following section draws on the findings of a research project undertaken by INTRAC affiliate, Lucy Earle, who has examined recent experiences of social movement action in the Brazilian context.

The research is based on findings of fieldwork with a social movement that organises around the provision of low-income housing in São Paulo, Brazil. In particular it reveals that social movements tend to focus on lobbying the state in order to ensure that it fulfils the rights of citizenship as set out in the constitution. This is a particularly powerful tool in Brazil since the constitution was written in 1988 through a highly participatory process. The group has therefore begun to engage with the legal system in a challenging manner, with a number of social movement leaders training as lawyers. By democratising the law, which in the past has been very much the realm of the Brazilian elites, the movement raises a serious challenge to the state by ‘playing the state at its own game’.

Social movements in Brazil are closely linked to leftwing parties, particularly the Workers’ Party (PT). However many national and international NGOs are uncertain about funding social movements because of this and also because social movements sometimes act illegally in order to get attention from the media and force the state to engage with them. Social movements in this way move between legal processes and illegal acts.

Though many INGOs may be wary of supporting social movements, they have four key strengths which allow them to maximise the use of any support offered. First, social movements are membership-based; they lose their rationale for existence if they lack the support of their membership. Second, social movements are of necessity quick to adapt to changing circumstances. They have to respond to the problems their members are facing, such as imminent evictions and

unsafe housing. Social movements are also highly participatory and put a strong emphasis on internal democracy and empowerment of members, providing the opportunity for people to learn about the root causes of their poverty. Thus an educational or capacity building component is inherent in their very being. Lastly, social movements are often oriented towards bringing about change in society or in the political arena and tend to draw on a rights-based discourse that is also in line with the discourses of other civil society actors, such as NGOs.

### The increasing failure by donors and governments to include civil society as a visible partner in development is reflected in current aid policy

Based on the findings of these types of research it appears that if we are truly committed to supporting civil society, the aid industry as a whole now needs to focus on and engage with less publicised actors including social movements, faith-based organisations and diasporas in development that have traditionally stood at the margins. However a successful partnership might depend on the ability of such groups to protect their independence and autonomy.

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# Civil society–donor partnerships: current and future prospects



The UK Department for International Development's (DFID) new Permanent Secretary, Minouche Shafik,

gave ONTRAC a brief interview where she reiterated her view that DFID's work with civil society will very much be part of a deeper relationship in the coming years.

DFID has been a front runner on the Paris Declaration and on ensuring progress on aid effectiveness, an area where many in civil society have complained of being sidelined. However DFID also sponsored the civil society background document for the third high-level meeting in Accra in September 2008. DFID's commitment to a rights agenda is also highlighted by support early last year for background documents for the OECD/DAC Steering Committee, which focused on gender, human rights and defending the rights of the poor to livelihoods which are under threat. There are definitely further changes in the air in terms of the way DFID works with civil society.

## 1. Do you have a vision of donor–civil society partnerships to improve collaboration on development programmes and targets such as the MDGs?

I see the vision of a partnership with civil society as a multifaceted one.

Civil society organisations (based in the south and the north) are important 'critical friends' to donors and governments, friends whose presence is essential and who are there to question and challenge policies. To a large degree, DFID as a donor shares similar objectives with CSOs, in terms of deep concern over issues such as chronic and ongoing poverty, inequality, gender rights and so on. However, the methods used to address these issues by donors and civil society organisations will, inevitably, differ.

CSOs have an important role to play not only in raising public awareness about

development issues, but also in the delivery of services in countries where governments are simply unable to perform the function of delivering basic and essential services – such as health and education – to the general population.

**In the UK, partnerships are very important and for a long time now, we have promoted in particular public awareness-raising and advocacy for development**

Civil society has also been an important partner to DFID in terms of advocacy. This has meant providing support to civil society where it is needed, to hold governments to account and also to help build capacity. Building civil society capacity will take account of the shortfalls in government capacity to deliver services, but can also involve challenging unequal policies or those which exclude particular groups in society. Civil society has an important role to play, indeed there is a strong view that a vibrant civil society is important for a democratic society.

The MDGs are part and parcel of DFID's corporate objectives. They remain firmly embedded in DFID's horizon and will continue to be have priority. I would stress that it is essential for governments, CSOs and the private sector to work together in order to expedite progress on the MDGs.

In addition, broader policy issues such as climate change, dealing with conflict, and justice in trade systems, will remain crucial to supporting the implementation of the MDGs between now and 2015. In spite of operating in challenging environments, DFID continues to work towards the goals of the MDGs in close partnership with CSOs in many countries. Two examples are Burma and Zimbabwe where, in the current climate, it is not easy for civil society to take an active role. Nevertheless, with support from DFID, civil society has provided

critical services to the health and social sectors in particular.

## 2. Where are partnerships working well?

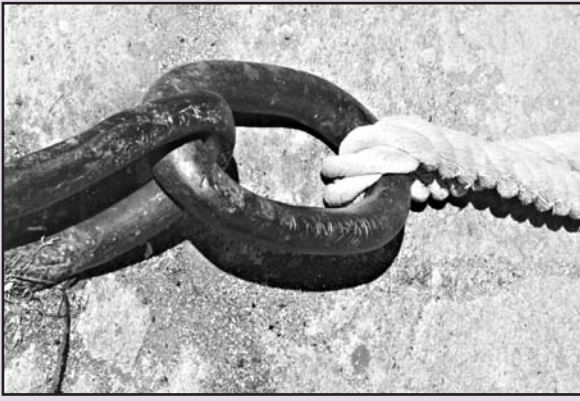
DFID has excellent relations with a wide range of CSOs in the UK and overseas. We work in partnership with civil society both through our country offices, and centrally, including through Programme Partnership Agreements and through various funds, including: the Civil Society Challenge Fund; Governance and Transparency Fund; Development Awareness Fund; and Conflict and Humanitarian Fund.

DFID currently has 27 Programme Partnership Agreements where core funding is provided to larger UK-based organisations to support their mission and to achieve shared objectives. The PPA partners play the role of advocates (the role of the critical friend) and they also provide support to local organisations in different parts of the world to enable better access to services, to contribute to policy development and to provide relief in emergencies. Countries I could mention are Burma, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Sudan, Lebanon, and Pakistan. In all of these countries, there has been a great deal of joint work, including facilitating humanitarian relief. I think that some level of success has been achieved in most places. Since such partnerships are working well, this type of global relief work will certainly be an ongoing priority.

**Partnerships are working effectively in difficult contexts such as humanitarian relief**

In addition, DFID has given much support to capacity building activity in several developing countries by working closely with local civil society (e.g. Ethiopia and Tanzania).

In these countries, DFID is fully aware of the ongoing need for outreach work, particularly in more remote areas, and often because of the nature of existing



It is crucially important for CSOs to set a good example and to be transparent and accountable. The IDC (International Development Committee of the UK Parliament) sets very high priority on these two factors. They also want

relationships between governments and CSOs. The issue of accountability and transparency at all levels (civil society and state) is crucial to DFID. Examples of the types of projects that DFID has supported in conjunction with CSOs include community development work in Afghanistan, development of PRSPs in Tanzania and Ethiopia, service delivery, and income generation activity through microfinance projects in many other countries.

For the past several years for example, DFID has been working on the curriculum in many schools (both primary and secondary) to spread knowledge and awareness about development issues amongst young people. DFID has not only focused on advocacy, but has also promoted voluntary work, provided support to black and ethnic minority groups and has applied the principles learned from overseas development programmes across the board (at all levels of the UK home environment) to educate and raise awareness about development generally.

### 3. What do you think are the main challenges facing existing donors and northern or southern CSOs in the next five years?

In my view, the main challenges facing donors and civil society are:

- to be transparent and accountable
- the ability to measure impact and demonstrate results
- to continue to maintain policy support for a development-led agenda when the political and economic situation on the ground in most places is very tough.

to see results and value for money. Where funding is provided, we need to ensure that the recipient organisations are accountable and also to show that the funding has a positive effect where it was intended to – we need to be able to demonstrate impact. If some of the impact results in better processes, that may be fine, but it is important to be able to show impact in outcomes on the ground.

One of the biggest challenges facing us is the ability to sustain a strong case for development-focused policies when the political and economic environment is both difficult and complex – for example many middle income countries have high levels of income inequality. We need to continue to work in such countries and we need to continue to raise the relevant development issues; we must not forget them simply because they are seemingly doing okay in other areas.

### 4. Finally, in terms of what happens in Accra...?

We continue to have high hopes about what may be achieved in Accra.

We are fully aware of the important role of civil society at Accra. We cannot afford to backtrack on the commitments made in the Paris Declaration. We must continue to move the aid effectiveness agenda forward and see its core objectives through.

The parallel civil society forum will also have a key role to play in putting pressure on donors and governments to deliver on the targets in order to make aid more effective.

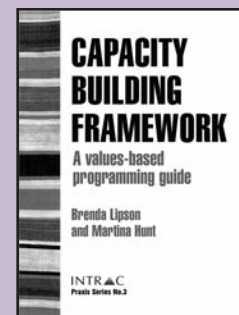
## INTRAC publications

# Capacity Building Framework: A values-based programming guide

*Brenda Lipson and Martina Hunt*

**Price: £12.95**

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The design and implementation of successful capacity building programmes involves a range of complex processes and considerations. This practical guide adopts a step-by-

step approach and introduces a new values-based model to enable decision makers to plan capacity building interventions in a variety of contexts. The guide is divided into three parts:

**Part One** sets in place some core references regarding what capacity and capacity building are. It focuses on organisational capacity, and looks at models for understanding different types of organisations and how they develop.

**Part Two** focuses on the values and principles that shape the programme, and explores issues of values and power at the individual, relational and organisational levels. It outlines how values and principles provide the reasons why organisations become engaged in capacity building.

**Part Three** explores the process of designing and implementing a programme, beginning by looking at the concept of working programmatically and then going through the stages of the design and implementation process.

A range of tools, case examples and critical questions guide the reader through the conceptual and process issues raised, making it an ideal reference work for field staff, programme advisers and local capacity building practitioners.

# The absence of citizens in fragile states

In all the literature available on the topic of fragile, failed and collapsed states there appears to be little that is concerned with the role citizens themselves might play in taking their governments to task, and which could contribute to determining the quality and course of government. Whilst many donors acknowledge that transparent government, and respect for the rights and supporting basic needs of citizens is an essential criteria to justify development assistance, few have worked out the need for consultative measures or a real dialogue with citizens (or their representatives) in conflict prone, fragile or failed states. This may often seem a difficult task in complex settings, but recent work by INTRAC suggests that it is donors rather than fragile or failed states alone which are as much part of the problem in attempts to build peace and stability.



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INTRAC's work also highlights a more general trend of threats to civic life and space through endemic violence and the security measures that have followed. Both have caused growing alarm in most regions of the world. It seems that northern donor concerns and an overemphasis on the role of the state and state building has taken place at the expense of civic space and citizens' participation in policy dialogue, at a time when it is needed more than ever before. Whilst few generalisations can be made about 'citenry' or 'civic space' (and thus the methods of engagement would inevitably vary from one fragile context to another), still there is a remarkable vacuum in the literature about how best to engage civil society in fragile states to ensure more positive outcomes for the

benefit of whole communities rather than a favoured few.

In addition our work also suggests that the role of many NGOs in fragile states appears to have been largely relegated to humanitarian assistance (OECD/DAC 2002, DFID 2005, Schetter 2007). This is clearly needed but there is little evidence of attempts to support local activity which might include civil society strengthening, advocacy or rights-based activities that are often most at risk in vulnerable contexts. INTRAC's recent work on national security and development has also shown that lack of donor support for civil society participation in general policy matters has allowed many governments to take advantage of the situation and label many CSOs as a 'threat' to national security, often with dubious evidence. This has led to the frequent hounding and harassment of social activists and CSOs, marginalising such groups even further (Sen and Morris 2008).

Not surprisingly, at the heart of some donor debates is a lack of coherence and understanding about how best to provide for the security of citizens who are often the most vulnerable, in situations where states have failed to provide basic services.

**Many donors have largely failed to address the issue of state fragility and proneness to failure and collapse**

Some northern governments and donors have, for example, sought to adopt a military stance as their contribution to strengthening the security sector and maintaining law and order. However citizens' groups in many conflict states have argued that a defence-related option is detrimental to social reconstruction – as revealed by the cases of the frontline states in the war on terror, notably Iraq and Afghanistan. In these countries violence, especially against civilians, has not abated despite billions of dollars of military and security related assistance.

Recently there has been growing consensus, as illustrated by Browne (2007)

**There is a remarkable vacuum in the literature about how best to engage civil society in fragile states to ensure more positive outcomes for the benefit of whole communities**

Ghani and Lockhart (2008) and also donors such as DFID (2005), which suggests that many donor programmes are on the wrong track as far as fragile and failed states are concerned. DFID argues for greater engagement in fragile states on humanitarian grounds, while Browne claims that, with some exceptions, donors have appeared at the 'wrong times and with the wrong attitudes' and have even sometimes undermined development progress in their policies towards fragile states. Ghani and Lockhart have argued that state building cannot be imposed from the outside, and that it needs to take place through internal consensus as well as external agreements. This view has been echoed by many, including INTRAC's recent work on the Lebanon as a fragile country, where western interference rather than assistance has been identified as a key factor in undermining the building of a pluralistic system (Fayyad 2008).

Thus despite the varied context of the literature (geographically placed, economic, social, political and cultural dimensions of state formation) there is unity in the critiques that many donors have largely failed to address the issue of state fragility and proneness to failure and collapse; most, it seems, have been unable to engage with citizens even where there has been social fragmentation and a complex situation on the ground. This perspective appears to be a recurrent theme in the literature that has appeared on fragile states over the past decade. It is important for both government and donors to recognise the vital role played by civil society and civic space, even in situations of dire conflict, in the resolution of disputes and of establishing some representation. Providing humanitarian aid alone, even though valued, may not resolve the fundamental issue of the need for dialogue with a



broad spectrum of citizenry, without outside pressures to favour one over others, based on power and geo-political interests.

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## Civil society in the Middle East: Historical and regional context

Civil society organisations face many challenges in the Middle East. INTRAC has been engaged in providing research and capacity building support to many. Valli Yanni outlines some of the core background issues, which highlights its complexity and diversity.

**A very diverse region**

The Middle East region is usually seen as comprising of three sub-regions: Mashriq (the Levant), Maghreb (North Africa), and the Gulf States. Similarities within the region include: language (Arabic); religion (predominantly Islam and secondly Christianity); colonial history (except Saudi Arabia and Northern Yemen); culture, customs and social and political systems; and conflict (Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, Yemen). Differences within the region include: level and impact of education (some with high level of education while others of very low level of literacy especially among women); distribution of wealth (from oil-rich countries to Yemen being on the list of ‘least developed countries’); as well as stage of development and effectiveness of civil society.

**The meaning of ‘civil society’**

The term civil society has no origin in Arabic but its translation from English means ‘society of the city’. The concept itself, like other concepts such as gender, has been taken on from western

models with the assumption that it will apply to the Arab world.

The work of civil society in the region has been mainly associated with philanthropy or charitable work especially in relation to the main religions, Islam and Christianity. Religious institutions in both religions have been historically involved in charitable work providing social services in health, education, direct assistance and other forms of welfare.

Philanthropy in the Middle East is deeply grounded in faith-related issues. Giving has a significant meaning: not just giving to the poor (as generally perceived in the West) but also as a duty and as part of social justice (Zakat and Sadaqa in Islam and Oushoor in Christianity).

**A brief overview of civil society in the region**

Over the decades, the focus of civil society’s work in the Middle East has been shifting from philanthropy (social welfare and direct assistance) to development (service delivery), emergency relief (aid and service delivery) and most recently and increasingly to advocacy (human rights, women’s rights, environmental issues). All of these forms of civil society’s work co-exist simultaneously. Civil society in the Middle East has followed the patterns of civil society movements





elsewhere in the world: from NGOs to CSOs, from service delivery to capacity building and from development to advocacy. In terms of their relationship with the state, CSOs are viewed as service providers brought in to fill the gap where the state is not fulfilling its role. Moreover, CSOs are mostly controlled by governments in the region (many of which are repressive regimes) with restrictions on NGOs' registration, activities and fund-raising.

### Civil society organisations – some examples

#### *Who are they and what do they do?*

CSOs in the Middle East are diverse in terms of: size, scope, mandate, governance, regulation, stage of development (from emerging to well-established), and level of effectiveness. The majority of CSOs are based on philanthropy (charitable organisations) which tends to limit their role to service delivery and traditional support for social welfare. Private donations make up the majority of funds for such organisations with limited regulation (until recently when counter-terrorism measures came into effect to put heavy emphasis on regulation of private donations). Other CSOs, as in other parts of the world, are more opportunistic and follow funding patterns rather than demand or societal needs. Most recently, many CSOs in the Middle

East have been involved in unconventional arenas such as women's rights, advocacy work, human rights, environmental issues, and research. NGOs across the Middle East are prohibited by law from engaging in political activities, thus those involved in rights-based and advocacy work face the toughest obstacles.

Examples include the Ibn Khaldun Centre for development studies which is an NGO in Cairo involved in research, advocacy and development programmes since 1988. The Lebanon has a few fora for coordinating CSOs' work (the Lebanese NGO Forum, the Collective of Lebanese Voluntary NGOs and the Arab NGO Network for Development). Whilst NGOs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories provide the major part of primary health care services, hospitals, rehabilitation centres and pre-school education.

### Dilemmas facing civil society in the region

The Middle East is a volatile region which presents many challenges for local CSOs and those who work with them from outside the region. These challenges derive from two main sources.

1. Internal to the region: repressive regimes; prolonged state of emergency in some countries; constraints on

freedom of association (hindering the efforts of NGOs engaging in human rights or advocacy activities, which are considered political); some regulatory laws date from early last century (and do not take account of the changes that have taken place since then); few coordinating bodies or networks to facilitate debates; poor relationships and interaction with governments compounded by lack of trust from both sides, a low funding base; weak internal capacities to define their own objectives and strategies thus becoming funder-driven.

2. External to the region: The war on terror has impacted on CSOs in terms of finance (restricted foreign funding), providing repressive regimes with yet another tool to hamper CSOs in the region, and the negative view emerging from the West about the Middle East (Islam/Arabs equals al-Qaeda and terror). There is also growing scepticism from CSOs in the region towards interventions from the West.

### Conclusion

Despite the extent of the challenges that they face, many CSOs in the Middle East have the will and the commitment to continue their struggle for social justice. It is important to raise their profile through forums such as that of Civicus, to demonstrate their diversity and potential role in their societies, and to show solidarity with their struggle.

Valli Yanni is a freelance consultant with expertise in participatory training, gender, advocacy and cultural diversity. Her experience derives from the Middle East as well as other parts of the world. This article is based on a presentation made to the Civicus World Assembly, June 2008.

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## Whatever Happened to Civil Society?

*The Netherlands, 3-5 December 2008*

Civil society is a frequently used term, but what does it actually mean? INTRAC's conference will re-examine the concept and role of civil society and focus on its significance in relation to current debates and practice in development, human rights and democracy promotion.

### Focus

The conference will explore the following issues:

1. Concepts and practice: what do we mean by civil society?
2. Relationships between civil society and the aid industry
3. Civil society and the State – contractor, watchdog or antagonist?
4. New challenges for civil society

Participants will include a wide range of global civil society actors such as activists and lobbyists, social movements' members, trade unions, media, local and international NGOs and community based groups. Academics, official and private donors, and policymakers engaged in civil society support programmes will also be present.

**Call for case studies:** Contributions are invited of case studies that document the roles, activities and interactions of civil society actors in their work on development.

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5-7 November 2008

Duration: 3 days

Location: London (Non-residential)

Theme: Strengthening Civil Society and Organisational Capacity Building

Price: £475

Support your partners to integrate advocacy work into their programmes. Benefit from this insightful course by learning how to identify core advocacy skills, find real issues, causes and solutions, as well as key strategies for policy change and advocacy in difficult contexts. Identify and meet the challenges faced by northern NGOs and donors in building advocacy alliances with southern partners.



conduct the research, managing the research process, how to ensure quality in data gathering, how to choose between methods. It will also draw on practical examples of research undertaken in the development field by practitioners.

### Getting the Most out of Your Research

19-21 November 2008

Duration: 3 days

Location: London (Non-residential)

Theme: Strengthening Civil Society and Organisational Capacity Building

Price: £475

How should research best be approached in development work? The aim of this course is to give you the tools to use research as effectively as possible in your work. It will provide understanding on how research is used in development work, incorporating a selection of key areas such as: planning effective research, choosing who should

### Gender Analysis and Planning

14-16 January 2009

Duration: 3 days

Location: London (Non-residential)

Theme: Organisational Capacity Building

Price: £475

Development planners and NGOs are becoming increasingly committed to incorporating a gender perspective into their work; however, many face challenges in practically applying it. In this course you will benefit from how to analyse and plan the gender perspective into effective development practice. You will also look at how to apply analytical tools and strategies to ensure that gender is prioritised on project and programme agendas.