

Civil society at a new frontier: new dynamics, challenges and opportunities



Villagers decide over the development in their village in Vietnam.

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INTRAC at 20: insights and lessons

INTRAC was one of the early social enterprises. Today we read much about such ventures in the media, and they are much vaunted by politicians and policymakers alike. But twenty years ago in 1991 when INTRAC was founded, they were a rarity – even an oddity. INTRAC had all the markings of an NGO – it was a registered non-profit and UK charity with strong values, a clear identity and mission, a constituency driven by the needs of the poor, a board made up of eminent development thinkers (including Robert Chambers and Malcolm Harper), and very uncertain funding.

But its financial model emphasised viability and sustainability. There was much talk in the early days of INTRAC being “lean and responsive” as well as being “value-driven and market-led”. We

didn’t call organisations like INTRAC ‘social enterprises’ twenty years ago. But in reality that is what it was. Its founders took an early decision that INTRAC should generate much of its own income rather than depend on donor handouts or philanthropic largesse.

This emphasis on financial viability and sustainability has meant that, at times INTRAC has struggled financially, but it has stood INTRAC in good stead. It is not donor-dependent. It has maintained its independence. It has benefited from a financial discipline driven by sustainability. Above all it has survived, even thrived, providing important support and services to the NGO community for the last twenty years. Something that some of the similar organisations established in the 1990s

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In this issue:

This special double issue of ONTRAC is to celebrate both the fiftieth issue of our newsletter, and also the twentieth anniversary of INTRAC. As part of our anniversary activities, we held an international conference in December 2011 on civil society – one of our core themes that lay at the heart of why we exist and what we do. The conference looked at civil society in the light of economic growth and the post-aid environment, and the challenges and opportunities presented by these. The articles in this issue draw together reflections from the twentieth anniversary conference, and looking to the future for civil society.

The issue begins with an overview by one of INTRAC’s founders on the insights and lessons that can be drawn from our own organisation’s experiences over the last twenty years. Then, following an outline of the emerging trends currently impacting on civil society across the globe, authors from Europe, South Asia, the Middle East, and North America come together to offer different perspectives, experiences and ways forward for civil society in the current climate.

to do similar work, such as El Taller or MWENGO, which were heavily donor-dependent, failed to do.

In light of this history it is useful to remember that INTRAC's roots lay in a 1990 proposal for a fully-funded international NGO development centre intended to provide the "world of NGOs with a resource for training, research and programme assistance". This proposal was explored at a conference in Oxford in November 1990, but failed to attract any major support – in hindsight a positive response. However, a small group of interested individuals – Alan Fowler, John Hailey, Brian Pratt – came together following this conference convinced that there was a need for some kind of organisation to help and support development NGOs.

Supporting development NGOs

It was from this rather unpromising start that INTRAC was born. It was seen as a completely new sustainable venture geared to supporting and servicing the needs of development NGOs in the North and the South, but one which was not to be a charge or financial burden on the sector.

The rationale on which INTRAC was based, and which a process of participative needs analysis confirmed, was that there was a need for such a support organisation because of the increased demands on NGOs arising from the rapid expansion of the scope of NGO development work through the 1980s.

This growth had not been matched by any increased capacity in development NGOs for policy development, research, evaluation and training, and came at a time when there were increased expectations from both donors and development practitioners as to how NGOs managed themselves. As a consequence there was significant international demand from NGOs themselves for support that was grounded in the NGO experience rather than just being imported from the private

or public sectors, which had been the norm up to then.

Through early 1991 the thinking behind the new organisation evolved and by September 1991 a formal concept paper was published. This identified INTRAC's role as providing management training and research services for European NGOs involved in relief and development activities in the South.

Many of the challenges and issues that NGOs faced when INTRAC was started are still with us

This paper also proposed that INTRAC's programmes would be based on three basic principles. First, the belief that learning, as a form of personal empowerment, is a product of the interplay between reflection and action. Second, that INTRAC as a value-driven organisation was not just dependent on skills and knowledge but also on values, attitudes and inter-relations. Third, that education for NGOs must be driven by the needs and conditions of the poor, rather than by theoretical priorities and concerns. These principles have stood the test of time and are as apposite today as they were twenty years ago.

A valued part of the NGO landscape

INTRAC has grown over the last twenty years. It is seen as a valued part of the NGO landscape. Analysis of the lessons from INTRAC's first two decades highlight not just the soundness of these principles, but also the importance of financial sustainability, and the way it has managed to balance its core values and maintained its independence and neutrality while still working collaboratively with a range of donors, consultants, and other NGO support institutions. Possibly most important has been the way INTRAC has linked its training and consultancy work with cutting edge research, and has been proactive in commissioning and publishing a range of valued and

practical commentaries and briefing papers.

It is also noteworthy that many of the challenges and issues that NGOs faced when INTRAC was started are still with us. INTRAC's initial concept paper highlighted the importance of organisation development for NGOs and the importance of developing programmatic skills for NGO staff. Initial thoughts for INTRAC's research themes included: the relationship between good government, human rights and development; issues around decentralisation; and new developments in evaluation methodologies. Some of the concepts that were part of INTRAC's early thinking, such as 'interventology' (i.e. a directive approach to OD), have not survived – but other concepts which are now inherent in INTRAC's work, such as civil society, were just not part of the discourse among NGOs in the early 1990s.

Clearly the sector and INTRAC is evolving. The future for INTRAC, as with any other NGO is uncertain. New collaborative models will evolve, new technologies and media applied, and new concepts come to the fore. Whatever the future holds for INTRAC, there are some important lessons for new NGOs from its twenty years as a sustainable social enterprise and a valued part of the NGO community.

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Emerging trends and civil society

The world is undergoing a period of major economic and social change. It is not always clear what the effects of these changes will be on civil society, but there are some emerging trends civil society must take into account. For civil society generally, and NGOs specifically, the worst possibility is that we ignore or deny the importance of understanding and adapting to these challenges.

Whilst the 'developed' economies are facing a continuing recession, which is unlikely to lift for several years, many so-called emerging economies are growing at remarkable rates. This conjunction is leading to several clear trends. Firstly, many aid agencies (both official donor agencies and NGOs) are withdrawing from the newly classified middle-income countries such as Cameroon, Cambodia and Lesotho.¹ Therefore it is important that we look at how this is affecting local civil societies, and particularly how local NGOs are coping with a post-aid environment.

Secondly, as some traditional donors see their budgets shrink there will be implications for previous recipients in developing countries, international NGOs based in donor countries and even the UN system, which is still dependent upon traditional donors for its income. Thirdly, as part of the changing balance of global economic power new donor agencies are being established in previous aid recipient countries, while the roles of Western-based INGOs are being revised.

Another clear trend seen across the globe has been the re-engagement of civil society with the political issues of the day. Whether on the streets of Cairo, Moscow, Santiago or Washington, we are seeing the emergence of a new generation who feel that the old

consensus politics and state dominance of debates are no longer reason to hold back from protest. Civil society groups are realising that decisions affecting citizens require action and debate, not merely passive acceptance. Despite the attempts to limit the space for civil society in some countries, a new generation is actively questioning the nature of the state, its social foundations and the right of leaders to ignore their citizens.²

Challenges to established organisations

These broad trends are a challenge to established organisations, especially those NGOs which have developed around the aid industry and its funding. For some the challenge is the loss or reduction in their funding, while others face a more profound challenge to their roles. Many accepted ways of working are becoming less relevant and many NGO leaders are either in denial, or unable to adapt to the changes around them.

Further, the increasing sub-contracting of service delivery to NGOs from governments and official donors is leading to the commoditisation of development. Development is being packed into discrete services (for example, immunisation, new seeds, microcredit), on a short-term contractual basis. This is moving many NGOs closer to the commercial sector (with which it now competes for such contracts) and away from its civil society roots.

The future arguably lies in a complete rethink of how partnerships, alliances and networks work best. Recent studies have shown that large INGOs do not necessarily have more impact through their advocacy than small organisations, except in cases where they are able to help different actors link up around a

common cause.³ The idea that we need global branding for international advocacy is almost certainly unsubstantiated by the practice. Creating new alliances will mean some unlearning and some creative thinking about how to make such alliances work based on cooperation rather than competition, which unfortunately has become a dominant paradigm for many international INGO networks.

The future arguably lies in a complete rethink of how partnerships, alliances and networks work best.

Three main issues

The focus of much development now centres on three main issues. Firstly, poverty is still with us but the focus seems to have moved to poor countries rather than poor people. Development agencies need to think where they stand on this important debate. It is unclear why more NGO donors have not revised their focus to look at the continuing poverty in some of these newly affluent countries, and what they should do about this.

Thus, inequality and marginalisation are increasingly important issues given the failure to eradicate poverty despite the rapid growth in many emergent economies. Secondly, the issue of climate change is increasingly of concern to groups across the world, and affects rich and poor countries alike. Despite slow progress in international fora, this is an issue that none of us can ignore.

Thirdly, for many donors security and national self-interest are increasingly drivers of their international aid programmes. Whilst Western donors have focused on security and counter-

¹ DFID, UK Aid: Changing lives, delivering results. March 2011: London, DFID.

² Tiwana, M. and N. Belay (December 2010) 'Civil Society: The clampdown is real. Global Trends 2009-2010', Johannesburg: CIVICUS, and CIVICUS (August 2011) 'Bridging the gaps: Citizens, organisations and dissociation. Civil Society Index summary report 2008-2011', Johannesburg: CIVICUS.

³ Atkinson, J. and M. Scurrah (2009) *Globalizing Social Justice: The Role of Non-Government Organizations in Bringing about Social Change*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

terrorism, many donors, including many new donors, are also focused on trade and access to raw materials. It is a myth that new donors do not have conditional aid; the difference is that they are less concerned with political conditionality and more about conditionality tied to terms of trade.

What is not in doubt is that we will see new issues emerge, and reactions and adaptation to these trends from civil society. This means some organisations may close while others change and thrive.

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Civil Society at a Crossroads?

INTRAC is one of five civil society support organisations currently involved in a collective reflection process about the future of civil society around the world. The group aims to address the question of **'what are the roles, capacities, contributions and limitations of civil society in the changing local and global contexts?'**

The group has identified key trajectories and events in the 21st century that have brought civil society to a crossroads, and the key questions that these raise for the future of civil society.

The group will produce publically available materials for both practitioners and policymakers arising out of these reflections.

You can find out more, and download the latest resources, at www.intrac.org/pages/en/civil-society-at-a-crossroads.html

Which civil society is at the crossroads?

In April 2010, four civil society support organisations came together for a two-day gathering in The Hague. PRIA (India), CDRA (South Africa), EASUN (Tanzania) and PSO (Netherlands) have worked together on various occasions. This session aimed at deepening our collaboration by exploring the essence of what a purposeful relationship meant to each of us. Besides sharing the stories of our organisations, the changing contexts in which we operate, our plans, dreams and challenges, we identified two issues that we felt connected us strongly. Firstly, we are all concerned about civil society and its roles, capacities, contributions and space. Secondly, our own organisations were facing serious challenges related to these same issues. We concluded that in order to understand the roles, capacities and space of civil society, including our own, we had to revisit civil society and reconnect to it, starting from our own local contexts.

That is in a nutshell how the idea for our current 'Civil Society at Crossroads' initiative was born. Meanwhile, other individuals and organisations interested in strengthening civil society, such as INTRAC (UK) and ICD (Communication and Development Institute) from Uruguay have joined this collective reflection and systematisation process about the future of civil society around the world. We start from a strong belief in civil society, defined as the collective actions initiated by citizens for shared public goods and purposes.

Grassroots actions are taking place around the globe, in the North, South, East and West. It is important to understand the commonalities and differences of these actions at this juncture. What are the bottom-up dynamics of civil society? What capacities and contributions can be built on? What does this mean for future roles

of civil society in promoting inclusion, equity and justice?

Initial explorations in our own countries in 2011 confirmed that civil society is at crossroads, or a junction or a roundabout; where choices have to be made regarding future direction. In East Africa, civil society leaders voiced concerns around being increasingly isolated as strong civil society players; and some are aligning themselves to the dominant political discourse by taking up positions in government. And a lack of confidence and self-conviction in civil society has led to weak strategies and no authentic commitment to social change beyond 'welfare-ist' service delivery.⁴

The state of civil society should be seen in the light of the state of our societies as a whole.

In Malawi, recently the role of civil society has had to change drastically due to the government's undemocratic practices, so that it continues to be relevant in light of these practices. However, civil society is only waking up slowly to its task, after having been asleep for years as the government was more or less producing results. The Dutch context shows how a substantive civil society in the Netherlands has become highly dependent on government subsidies and an attached (over)regulation. This has led to serious questions of identity, legitimacy and a larger disconnect from wider civil society. Problems have become even more evident now that the subsidy system is changing.

Civil society is a natural social phenomenon

Identifying these crossroads led to some observations, one being that the state of civil society should be seen in the light of the state of our societies as a whole.

⁴ EASUN eNews, 28 December 2011.



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A meeting at the dialogue club in Kabagari, Rwanda.

Our societies are at crossroads, facing increasing tensions, crises and even turmoil. Another observation is that civil society is a natural social phenomenon, that goes beyond aided, subsidised, and formalised initiatives, groups and sectors. The civil society linked to the aid environment is definitely at crossroads. But this is only a limited part of civil society, based on a merely functional, instrumental and often depoliticised 'model', with NGOs dominating the scene.

The so-called 'below the radar' civil society of self-organised, collective action, traditional formations and actors that have always been there, may not be at a crossroads, or less, or differently. During the last INTRAC conference on civil society⁵, one participant referred to this part of civil society as the 'immune system' of society. Hence, a deeper understanding of how this immune system works and what it needs to strengthen itself could eventually benefit our societies as a whole.

During the past few months we started the process of revisiting, regaining and reconnecting to this civil society – initially in the UK, Netherlands, Chile,

South Africa, Uganda and India – with the explicit intention to include as many countries and regions as possible. Our approach has been bottom-up, people-centred and relationship-focused.

Relations between civil society actors and the state and market vary over time

The cases from the UK and South Africa offer a historical perspective, and show how relations between actors in civil society and the state and market vary over time. These relationships, as well as the development of civil society itself, appear to be cyclical processes; an 'ebb and flow' of contestation and co-creation, energetic activism and silent reflections, where civil society space is expanding or shrinking subsequently.

The case from Chile focuses on the 2011 student protests. What started with educational demands soon became a widely supported mass movement embodying a crisis of representation. How did this happen? What were the alliances of the student movement? Obviously, we are also keen to include cases on the events of the Arab Spring, as these are impressive

examples of collective citizen mass action.

In conclusion, the 'Civil Society at Crossroads' initiative aims to reconnect to civil society by looking at its local, community-level, endogenous nature in different societies. How is civil society dealing (or not) with societal challenges? What types of interactions and relations do they have with more formal organisations, political society and private business? What conflicts or synergies emerge? We may conclude that certain civil society manifestations are shrinking or even disappearing, while others emerge. Through this process we aim to get insights that inspire and revive us to revise our own roles as civil society support organisations in strengthening authentic civil society actors and actions, beyond the crossroads.

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⁵ INTRAC 20th Anniversary Conference 'Civil Society at a New Frontier', 5-6 December 2011. www.intrac.org/pages/en/current-event.html

Civil society at a crossroads in a changing India

A number of important recent trends within India are likely to have an increasing impact on the future role and work of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the country.

These key trends include:

- The Indian government (along with state governments) is now in a position to spend more public resources on social sectors including health and education. Increasingly, CSOs are invited to deliver such government-funded programmes as service providers.
- There is also a growing number of new rights-based government programmes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme, recognising the needs of the rural poor. There are also programmes like the National Rural Health Mission which recognises the need for rural citizens and creates spaces for citizen engagement. In many of these programmes CSOs are increasingly playing vital roles.
- A number of participatory democratic governance reforms have been initiated, such as enactment of Right to Information Acts, Public Service Guarantee Act, social accountability mechanisms like social audits, decentralised planning and so on. Many CSOs have not only played important roles in shaping such acts, policies and programmes but also are increasingly called upon to help implement these reforms.
- There has been a growth in urban middle-class social activism, particularly among young people. The recent anti-corruption movement in India and a number of movements to put pressure on the judiciary involved middle-class people taking to the streets to register their protest.



Telecentre training in Kerala, India.

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- There has been a revolutionary emergence of print and electronic media, many backed by corporate finances and neo-liberal public policies. Whilst many of them mostly cater to middle-class interests, CSOs have also been able to utilise the spaces provided by the media. The use of technology and social media, particularly by urban young people, has also contributed to both virtual and physical social mobilisation.
- There has been a growth in corporate social responsibility promoted by private corporations. Many private corporations are spending considerable resources either through creating their own foundations or through funding CSOs doing service delivery programmes.
- As India has graduated from a low income country to lower-middle income country, the ODA is drying up very quickly. An exodus of bilateral agencies and international NGOs has led to diminishing sources of flexible resources to CSOs. This has tremendous implications on CSOs, particularly in maintaining their autonomous position vis-a-vis their governments. As CSOs are asked to participate in tender-based contractual services, they are also exposed to uneven competition with private sector consultancy agencies.
- The regulatory mechanisms for CSOs, including laws, rules and procedures, are reducing the political space available for CSOs. The reduction is such that a large number of CSOs are likely to close within a couple of years' time.

This situation has a number of implications on the functioning of CSOs: in order to reduce human and institutional costs many CSOs are terminating staff and reducing investment in capacity development; the autonomy of the CSOs in terms of setting agendas or choosing issues are severely compromised, as they are mostly driven by the donors and governments; many CSOs are changing their business model, from a grant-model to a revenue-model where they can raise their own resources; some CSOs are trying to tap the new resources in the huge middle-class

through national fundraising; a number of bogus organisations in connivance with government officials are accessing governmental resources.

Changing relationships

With the changing contexts, civil society has witnessed significant change in its relationships with political society, government and corporations, and even in the relationship among themselves.

'Political society' refers to the political leadership, political parties or any other organisations following the ideology of a political establishment. The general image of the political society among the citizens is that of power monger, corrupt, oblivious about the developmental and governance crises and lacking statesmanship. As the media and civil society are continuously trying to hold the political society accountable to the citizens, civil society suffers from a backlash which affects the relationship between the two.

With regard to the relationship with government, two kinds of views are in vogue. Where there is commonality in interest and agenda the relationship is cordial at the national, state and local levels. There has been increasing cooperation between these two sectors. Many CSOs are currently working closely with local governance institutions.

However, the relationship is antagonistic where CSOs demand accountability, expose corrupt officials, and raise questions about anti-poor policies. The government is increasingly regulating civil society through various rules and regulations, such as the recently amended Foreign Contribution Regulation Act and the Direct Tax Code.

Private corporations taking advantage of governmental deregulation, economic liberalisation and globalisation have accumulated enormous fortunes. Many such corporations have started promoting corporate social responsibility

(CSR) and private philanthropic activities, and several are involving CSOs in the implementation of their CSR programmes. Looking at this relationship, many corporations are interested in social causes and join with CSOs for joint developmental activities.

Many corporate leaders have come out openly to support the recent anti-corruption movement. The recently drafted Companies Bill, 2009 (Govt. of India) suggests that companies are expected to earmark two per cent of their net profits towards CSR activities every year. However, reports suggest that there might be some exemptions in the rules which will follow the new Act.

Mandatory CSR, even if mentioned in the Bill, may not be binding for all companies. Also, the government may not suggest penalties for failing to spend the required percentage of profits on CSR. There are also reservations on the part of some CSOs about this relationship – with these CSOs viewing so-called CSR as an external cloak that hides the corporations' agenda to always promote their market interest. Such sceptical views have hindered the development of a healthy relationship.

The Indian government could tap the expertise available within CSOs in order to support developmental interventions in other developing countries.

There has been change in the relationship among CSOs themselves. Although there are disconnects between the traditional CSOs and the new movements, there are still channels for sharing resources, expertise, information and action. Many CSOs are supporting such new movements. While online collaborations are increasing, on the whole field-level collaborations are declining.

What now?

In light of India's new role as a donor, the government could tap the expertise available within CSOs in order to support developmental interventions in other developing countries. CSOs must come together and set up a collective agenda for working together and engaging with the state to promote South-South collaboration.

CSOs also require new capacities to renew their organisations in order to reinforce transparent and accountable governance within their organisations. This assumes additional importance as CSOs are engaged in exacting accountability and transparency from public and private institutions.

CSOs must look for new leadership and encourage the development of human resources. Since the voluntary mindset is declining, there should be serious attempts to motivate people to develop this mindset.

The state should provide resources to CSOs for contributing in various developmental programmes from the vantage point of CSO capacities. Similarly, the private sector can also support CSO innovation. Consortium funding where the government, community, private sector and CSOs can come together to support governance reforms and socio-economic development could also be promoted.

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Civil society and the market: how to find your way through the minefield

Should you turn your NGO into a social enterprise in order to reduce its dependence on unreliable donors? Focus on micro-entrepreneurs at the 'bottom of the pyramid' in order to support self-sustaining wealth creation instead of reproducing the paternalism of foreign aid? Forge creative partnerships with corporations in order to raise labour standards and inject more money into poor communities instead of just criticising them for their failings?

Increasingly common questions

Questions like these are increasingly common in the NGO community, and they generate a great deal of excitement and confusion. It's true that lots of innovations lie at the intersection of civil society and the market, but it's not true that they are easy to exploit or come without problems of their own. Get the balance right and you can generate more impact and more resources for your NGO; get it wrong and you can easily drift away from your mission for social transformation and limit your options in dealing with the most difficult issues of injustice and exploitation.

That's because the choice to engage with business and the market always carries costs as well as benefits. The benefits come from the market's ability to reach large numbers of people with useful goods and services and sustain this process over time by making and reinvesting profits, driving resources to their most efficient use through competition. The costs come from the fact that many elements of social change don't generate quick results or returns on investment, so they are ill-suited to market-based activity; and they rely on cooperation, participation and solidarity which are 'inefficient' in market terms. So the move to the market can actually push resources away from community organising, advocacy and other work that is crucial to long-term development, and it can

exclude those who have less purchasing power or who are more expensive to reach with essential services and other forms of support. That's why this debate is so important.

The choice to engage with business and the market always carries costs as well as benefits.

If that's the case, what's the best way to find your way through the minefield of civil society and the market? In answering that question it may help to think of this relationship as a continuum instead of as two separate sectors. At one end of the continuum are civil society activities which have little or no link to the marketplace, like caring for one another and connecting underserved constituencies to local politics; at the other end are commercial activities which don't pretend to advance civil society or social change, like drilling for oil in Alaska.

In between we find a range of activities which seek to blend elements of civil society and the market in different ways and to different degrees, including commercial revenue generation by NGOs, social enterprise and social entrepreneurs, venture philanthropy and social investment, corporate social responsibility and new business models that change the ways in which firms are governed and held accountable for their actions.

Combination of costs and benefits

Each of these blends will generate a different combination of costs and benefits as the balance between civil society and the market changes and the influence of one or the other becomes more dominant. That's an important point, because although NGOs may see themselves as drivers of change in the business community or in the economy more broadly, those who are inspired by

market principles may see change flowing in the opposite direction, from business to civil society in order to make NGOs 'more efficient' and privatise more social services.

It's vital that NGOs understand these different motivations and take a systematic and sophisticated view of the interactions between civil society and the market so that they can assess the most effective course of action in each set of circumstances. What does that mean in practice?

First, be very clear what you want to achieve, and what you are prepared to sacrifice in order to achieve it. Then decide what mixtures of civil society and market-based activities are most likely to generate the change you want to see.

For example, if you want to strengthen democracy and bring marginalised voices into the decision-making process in local politics, or hold businesses accountable for their use of natural resources in fragile ecosystems, it makes little sense to privilege the market in your strategies and tactics. On the other hand, if you want to expand the use of fuel-efficient cooking stoves or low-cost computers then social enterprise or partnerships with established companies in these sectors make good sense.

Second, think carefully about the potential costs and benefits of these strategies and put in place a system to monitor how they play out in practice. If you find that market-based activities take you too far away from your mission or impose compromises that make you feel uncomfortable, then you can pull back and re-adapt. Systems like this will help to build a knowledge base in this crucial area to replace the limited information and experience we have to work with today.

Finally, since social entrepreneurs and venture philanthropists are fond of using

business language in relation to NGOs and their work, what's the 'bottom line' in this conversation? How about this: "explore new opportunities but don't buy into the hype that surrounds them?" NGOs should stay loyal to their civil society origins even as they experiment with the market. If they can do that, exciting times lie ahead.

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The INTRAC NGO Research Programme

Too little time and too few resources to explore the big questions facing NGOs today and to step back, reflect and turn your organisation's practical experiences into meaningful research?

The **INTRAC NGO Research Programme** can keep you informed of the latest strategic trends in the sector, help your organisation capture and share practitioner experiences and transform them into publications and research.

Members receive support, space and services to help their organisation: gain a strategic overview the sector; turn practitioner experiences into meaningful research; enhance its research capacity; develop links to and learn from other NGOs and research institutes.

For more information on the programme and how to join, contact research@intrac.org or visit www.intrac.org/pages/en/research.html

Engaging with emerging social movements – an international NGO perspective



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In the face of a rapidly changing environment, a group of INGOs and other civil society representatives gathered in Oxford in December 2011 to reflect on the meaning of these changes. How should they read the Arab Spring? Are they connected to the Occupy movement? What lessons can be drawn from these recent events? Have INGOs been so caught up in their own internal challenges, linked to their increasingly dwindling budget, that they don't dare look outside their windows for fear of being confronted with the fact that the world is changing?

On the second day of the conference, I had the honour and the pleasure of chairing a small group to reflect on how formal INGOs could engage with informal social movements. After hearing compelling stories from individuals who had been involved in the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement and the Chilean student protest, it seemed appropriate to discuss how INGOs could reconnect with these movements. Because, let's face it, aren't these movements precisely

attempting to achieve the changes INGOs try to set in motion? Why can these spontaneous citizen-led movements achieve more in a few weeks or months than INGOs manage in decades?

After a short discussion of what constitutes formal and informal, and agreeing that informal movements do have some kind of organisational principles leading their actions, our group embarked on a passionate discussion on how and why INGOs could connect with these movements.

Interestingly enough, little time was spent discussing whether INGOs should engage with informal movements. It was a no-brainer. Assuming INGOs' values overlap with these movements, and if INGOs are true to their beautifully articulated mission statements alluding to social justice, solidarity, and the urgency to change power relations, there is no way for INGOs other than being in contact with these formidable informal movements. These movements are in

the driver's seat of change processes, the expression of citizens taking action.

So the question is not whether but how INGOs can best engage or interact with those powerful movements. A supplementary question would then be how can INGOs organise solidarity, which may force them to move out of the formal framework ruling their existence and start operating at the frontier of the informal.

Our group came up with steps that INGOs should follow prior to engaging with informal movements. For some, it may look like 'engaging social movements for dummies', for others these are open doors; in any event, here they come. INGOs should:

1. **Reconnect to the fundamentals** of their identity, their purpose and their core values. While doing so, engaging with social movements will become obvious. It actually means behaving according to their mission statements. This step is not so much about the past, or going back to one's roots, as it is about being true to one's identity and acting accordingly.
2. **Think – act – learn and unlearn.** Some even argued that INGOs should stop thinking in order to start acting. While this may hold some truth for those INGOs exclusively focusing on writing policy documents, thinking should not preclude action. On the contrary, reflection should be the driver of INGO's actions. INGOs should go to the streets, mingle, get a feel for what's happening on the ground and stop operating in splendid isolation.
3. **Meet the movement**, i.e. start engaging. Far from engaging in a formalised partnership with the setting of goals and results, INGOs should talk to the citizens forming the movement, get a feel for who they are, what they do, and what motivates them. INGOs should get out of the comfort of their cosy offices and start invading the streets.
4. **Seek value overlap** on a particular issue both the INGO and the movement feel passionate about. Emotions, anger and joy form a sound and powerful basis for engagement. Look for civic energy. Start building a relationship.
5. **Be responsive, modest, sensitive, and explore complementary resources:** what can INGOs do to join, support or collaborate? It obviously depends on the movement's needs, but moral (we are with you, your fight is our fight), financial (do you need cash to rent a space, buy stationery, make flyers), and political support (we will make everything possible to protect the space you are claiming) are often valued.
6. **Identify a shared strategy that employs those complementary resources:** resources can only be used for the 'cause', which requires a shift away from 'NGOism', the disease permeating the aid sector.
7. **Build capacity for constructive conflict management:** conflicts will arise, change can't happen without conflict. This presupposes INGOs are able to step out of their comfort zone to face the heat, away from a comfortable consensus-seeking model, because the roadmap to change is paved with conflicts.
8. **Build a shared campaigning organisation** which allows mutual influence and ownership. As much as

possible, INGOs and movements should investigate the possibility of organising joint campaigning.

9. **Find ways to hold each other accountable.** Promote mutual accountability, move away from accountability as a governance model or a supervising committee, be true to the cause, and deliver on your promises. This basically refers to being a trustworthy and reliable partner.

So these are the steps. Nothing short of brain surgery! In any event, to go through them properly, INGOs will most likely need an antidote to 'NGOism', the virus that keeps on haunting them and often mutates in aid corporatisation or result fetishisms. Surprisingly, the antidote to this virus comes from other sectors other than civil.

Civic energy is to be found everywhere and is not the monopoly of INGOs or other civil society organisations. For example, for the December conference, two sponsors were found: one from the government and one from the market. Both will provide the necessary impetus for INGOs to engage informal movements. The first one is Nike, which motivates INGOs to 'just do it'. The second is the president of the US, Barack Obama, who is of the opinion that INGOs, well, yes they can. Not only can they, but they also should. Whether they will remains to be seen.

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Civil society under pressure

Political space is essential for a vibrant and healthy civil society yet evidence shows that space for civil society is being restricted in an increasing number of countries. Political space for civil society is often a very sensitive topic. In some countries, even raising it as an issue can be dangerous for civil society actors.

One such country is Malawi. Until recently Malawi was considered to be a relatively stable and democratic country. However, in July last year, 19 people were killed and 250 arrested during a series of demonstrations. These demonstrations were the culmination of a series of events, beginning in December 2010 when President Bingu wa Mutharika disbanded the national electoral committee and postponed local elections.

In April 2011 Malawi expelled the British High Commissioner in response to a leaked document that described the President as authoritarian and immune to criticism. As a result many donors suspended their budget support for Malawi. The response of the Malawian government was criticised by parts of Malawian civil society, which has subsequently faced extensive harassment. The Malawian government has banned media outlets which are not considered to benefit the public interest and restricted the right to hold peaceful demonstrations.

ACT Alliance has documented that political, legal and operational space for civil society organisations has diminished markedly in recent years.

The Malawian case is just one example of a worrying trend we are seeing in many of the countries where DanChurchAid and other members of the ACT Alliance are operating. In a recent report, 'Shrinking Political Space for Civil Society Action', ACT Alliance has documented that political, legal and operational space for civil society



A day before the July 20 demonstrations in Malawi, youth from the ruling party wielded pangas in the city of Blantyre.

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organisations has diminished markedly in recent years.⁶

Human rights defenders, trade unionists, members of NGOs and social movements and even the defence lawyers providing legal assistance to them are increasingly the target of repression, restrictions and abuse.

Legislation restricting civil society has been introduced in a number of countries. In Cambodia, civil society is fighting against a draft NGO law that would require all civil society organisations to register with the Cambodian government and allow them to ban organisations it finds "troublesome". The law is unclear in terms of what is required from an organisation to be approved, yet any activity not approved would be considered illegal under the proposed law.

Civil society organisations have campaigned for a law that respects human rights and meets international standards. They have succeeded in ensuring the bill has been published, discussed with civil society and revised. Unfortunately, the changes made are minimal and the proposed law still constitutes a very real threat to civil society and democracy in Cambodia.

Why is this happening?

There is no single explanation for this trend but there are some identifiable factors that contribute to it. First, it may be a response to civil society becoming much better organised and successful in working for human rights both at the national level and internationally. Secondly, global anti-terror measures could be seen both as an explanation for restrictions or, in some cases, even an excuse for governments to clamp down on civil society actors perceived as difficult.

Thirdly, the term 'national ownership', which forms part of the aid effectiveness agenda, has been interpreted by some governments as 'government ownership', resulting in the marginalisation of civil society. The term was replaced with 'democratic ownership' at the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness held in Busan, South Korea in November 2011. Furthermore, the Busan outcome document specifically highlights the need for "an enabling environment for civil society, consistent with international rights, that maximises the contributions of civil society to development".⁷ However, whether this will result in

⁶ ACT Alliance (March 2011), 'Shrinking Political Space for Civil Society Action', Geneva: ACT Alliance

improvements on the ground remains to be seen.

Fourth, repressive governments are aware that today, new donors that are less stringent regarding human rights and good governance are willing to fill the gap left by traditional donors that leave or threaten to leave countries with a poor track record of protecting human rights.

Finally, recent events in northern Africa and the Middle East may have encouraged governments elsewhere in the world to become tougher on civil society actors.

So what can be done?

Just as there is no single explanation for increasing civil society restrictions, there is no one size fits all solution. Firstly, the issue has to be dealt with at national level within individual countries. National advocacy strategies for securing an enabling environment for a vibrant and diverse civil society must be formulated by domestic civil society actors with, if necessary, the help and support of international partners.

Civil society must carefully evaluate and calculate the risks entailed in each context where there is a shrinking of political space, as being asked to leave the country for taking a stand could be counterproductive. In any case, civil society needs to keep collaborating and sharing with development actors worldwide in response to new obstructive NGO legislation and other measures that prevent civil society engagement in development processes.

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Where does the Busan Partnership leave civil society?¹

Civil society from around the world finally had its voice heard at the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness held in Busan, South Korea, in November 2011. Human rights, the rights-based approach, gender equality and citizen accountability made it into the final *Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation*. But what does the vision of development presented in the Busan Partnership offer for civil society as we move into 2012?

A well-earned seat at the table

In 2002 in Monterrey, Mexico, a small group of large donor countries and agencies met. This meeting was a defining moment in a process which would frame aid debates throughout the 2000s – the aid effectiveness agenda. But at the start it was extremely exclusive. Developing countries fought hard to have their voices properly heard in the subsequent events and documents. Likewise, civil society organisations around the world clamoured to have a seat at the table.

In the last few years, development NGOs and civil society organisations represented through national, regional and even global platforms, have come together to formulate their demands around aid effectiveness. In short, civil society organisations wanted to see: a commitment made to ‘democratic ownership’ in development (i.e. stronger accountability between government and citizens for development and a real country-led rather than government-led process); a greater commitment to human rights within development cooperation; recognition of civil society organisations as independent development actors in their own rights; a more equitable and inclusive development cooperation system; and greater transparency. Many of these demands did make it into the final Partnership document, indicating

that the time and resources dedicated to this were worth it.

The Busan common principles and development framework

The Busan Partnership offers a set of ‘common principles’ for development effectiveness (a shift from the *aid* effectiveness of the past). These are:

- Ownership of development priorities by developing countries
- Focus on results
- Inclusive development partnerships
- Transparency and accountability to each other

A new framework for development is also proposed, built on the following concepts:

- Development is driven by strong, sustainable and inclusive growth.
- Governments’ own revenues play a greater role in financing their development needs. In turn, governments are more accountable to their citizens for the development results they achieve.
- Effective state and non-state institutions design and implement their own reforms and hold each other to account.
- Developing countries increasingly integrate, both regionally and globally, creating economies of scale that will help them better compete in the global economy

The idea of the country level as the nexus of development is confirmed. Transparency and accountability are crucial. And there is greater space for the inclusion of more development actors within the framework. However, it is also a vision of development which is grounded in market principles and global economic integration.

Of greater concern is the absence of solid commitments within the Partnership. Real targets and indicators

⁷ ‘Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation’, December 2011. www.aideffectiveness.org/busanhlf4/images/stories/hlf4/OUTCOME_DOCUMENT_-_FINAL_EN.pdf



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in a few selected areas only remain to be debated in the coming 12 months. Many of the complex ideas present in earlier declarations, such as harmonisation and alignment, have all but disappeared. The words that stand out above all others are 'differential' and 'respective' with regard to commitments, providing an opt-out clause for those donors who have no intention of following the path set by OECD donors. This appears to have been the price for getting China to participate.

A triumph for inclusion, but what of civil society?

Many voices fed into the Busan Partnership, but as the drafting process for the outcome document progressed the voice of non-OECD donors became stronger. Considerable emphasis was given to alternative forms of cooperation, including South-South and triangular cooperation (where activities involve partners from other developing countries as well as northern countries). We are moving into a new era for development cooperation, one in which new donors and alternative actors will play a greater role.

As other articles in this edition of ONTRAC demonstrate, civil society in many countries is facing new challenges and new opportunities. Over the past five years in particular, time, effort and resources have been ploughed into aid effectiveness by civil society organisations. This has involved improving their own record on aid effectiveness, and it has involved

lobbying hard to ensure that alternative perspectives are given space within global aid policies and approaches. The Busan Partnership reflects this.

Gender equality, the rights-based approach, and democratic ownership may have made it into the Busan Partnership. However, a huge amount of work remains to be done by civil society organisations and platforms to turn what look like token gestures into tangible actions. Accountability, justice, human rights and participation remain buried beneath a model of development that is firmly growth-led and based on global economic integration. Civil society may have won a seat at the table in Busan, but might that mean co-optation into an agenda set by donors and developing country governments, many of whom are repressing civil society? The challenge for representatives of global civil society is whether they can both sit at the table and also lobby effectively for a wider range of development actors to fulfil their 'differential' commitments.

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- 1 This paper draws on a longer Briefing Paper on the process leading up to the adoption of the Busan Partnership. Briefing Paper 29 – The Busan Partnership: implications for civil society, is available to download at www.intrac.org/resources.php

Latest civil society resources

Our recent work around the issues explored in this issue of ONTRAC has produced a number of downloadable resources. All these papers are available to download from our resources database at www.intrac.org/resources.php.

Highlights include:

- Global changes and civil society – background paper for 'Civil society at a new frontier': INTRAC conference, December 2011
- Research Briefing Paper - Cyprus civil society: developing trust and cooperation
- Examples of Good Practice in Bridging Social Capital
- Briefing Paper 25: From Corporate Social Responsibility to Corporate Accountability and Beyond

Our recently completed research project in Cyprus, looking at the role of civil society in promoting trust, cooperation, and reconciliation across the island, has led to more resources in addition to the research briefing paper above. These include a summary booklet of the seven in-depth case studies conducted, and a civil society toolkit that provides practical ideas for planning and carrying out activities aimed at promoting trust and reconciliation between divided communities. More details are available at www.intrac.org/pages/en/cyprus.html.

Our latest book on civil society, 'Civil Society in Action: global case studies in a practice-based framework', is available to purchase online for only £12.95. Visit www.intrac.org/resources.php?action=resource&id=705 to order your copy!



Civil society in the Middle East: new dynamics, challenges and c

The tsunami of change that has been brought about by the Arab Spring provides the template within which the visions, plans and programmes of civil society organisations (CSOs) should be framed in the coming months and years.

In the past the role of CSOs has been unclear. It was not targeted at the mainstream, but was limited to the major and large institutions in the state. In addition these institutions' work focused on the analysis and study of various social phenomena, scrutinising and diagnosing their points of weakness and strengths – work that was distant from the role of popular initiatives and oral discourse, and which lacked a clear position with regard to these phenomena. Along with this the continuous focus of these organisations was on what is apparent, and they moved away from delving into the substance and depths of the issues around them.

CSOs' role has recently evolved

In spite of this CSOs have also been affected by the global, regional and local economic and political developments. Their role has recently evolved due to the demand for development and the need for change in these unexpected economic and political circumstances, and civil society actors have moved towards forming a dynamic framework for the participation of the masses in the development process, and to provide some of the services instead of the state. This development has led to light being shed on this sector at the social, political and intellectual levels. Recently, advocacy institutions have also appeared and are working on promoting rights, human rights and democratic transformation.

An in-depth reading into the roles and positions of CSOs in the Middle East in general and in Jordan in particular, indicates a qualitative and quantitative transformation in the different traditional

and stereotypical roles assigned to the CSOs in the various development fields. CSOs have become capable of organising the participation of the people in determining their futures, and addressing the policies and programmes that affect their chances of benefitting from the gains of human development processes.

In addition to this, CSOs have been involved in spreading the culture of institutional building and stressing the importance of the citizen, emphasising the will of the citizens in the historic events and attracting them to actively contribute to achieving the major transformations in their communities so that these changes do not remain the exclusive reserve of the ruling elite.

CSOs have been involved in spreading the culture of institutional building and the culture of upholding the citizen.

However a gap still exists between CSOs and popular movements and the government. This gap, on the one hand, highlights the weakness in communication channels between CSOs and popular movements, which has affected their collaboration. On the other hand it has also emphasised the weak communication between the official, informal, and verbal discourse which has contributed as a whole in promoting distrust of the popular movements in the role of the government. This poor communication has in turn reflected on the role of these CSOs and popular movements in the development process.

When we delve into the challenges faced by CSOs working in all areas of development we see:

- First and foremost, the challenges related to **volatility and lack of funding** where the activities of many organisations depend on the availability of stable funding

resources to ensure their survival and continuity.

- A multiplicity of civil society institutions, due to multiple funders and donor agencies, which has created **bureaucratic organisations** comparable to the governmental sector, and which has reduced the interest in creating true change in reality. This does not apply only to the relationship of CSOs with other organisations, but also goes beyond that to the heart and structures of these organisations.
- A **lack of transparency** and decrease in the level of democratic practices within the procedures and systems applied in civil society institutions.
- **Duplication and lack of integration** in the programmes and activities adopted by CSOs not only at the state level but also at the local level in terms of activities and programmes, and at the regional level – constricting the regional networking process to only certain sectors such as women and childhood.
- The **increase of poverty and unemployment**; it is estimated that more than 60 million Arabs are illiterate, which hinders the spread of political culture and participation of the individual in civic life and building an effective civil society.
- The **absence of mechanisms for institutional development**, and the reliance on individual ad hoc and random work in many instances. This, coupled with the low level of expertise in managing organisations, and a lack of clear objectives for some of these organisations and areas of operation, results in a permanent state of confusion.

In this context, it is important to support these institutions in acquiring a more

d opportunities

popular character, which will help them in performing a more tactical transformative role that our communities need, and through which CSOs will be able to contribute in the social and political transformation of the community. It will allow them to participate collectively in the formulation of public policies and to exert pressure on decision makers and policymakers in order to modify or develop new policies that address the interests of the majority and which ensure the institutionalisation of the democratic rights-based approach.

What is required from us as CSOs is to revert back to our identity and our true goals, avoid unorthodox ideological, profitable gains, duplication and contradiction, and search for points of convergence and sharing. We should seek complementarity among CSOs in general and those working in development for the purpose of achieving true human development – establishing and consolidating genuine partnerships between the government and private sectors and sharing the burdens to achieve sustainability and the participatory role of the CSOs in all areas of development.

From the above we can summarise the importance of the role which has been imposed on civil society institutions working in community development, to be able to fill the vacuum created by the community needs within the repercussions and the conditions that the political, social and cultural systems in the Arab world have been and are still being exposed to. The major focus of these organisations should be on identifying the needs of the communities they serve and identifying best practices to meet these needs in collaboration with government and private sector. In addition these organisations should move away from focusing on foreign funding as the major source for their sustainability and focus on gaining the



2009–2010 Iranian election protests in Haft-e Tir Square, Tehran.

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confidence and support of the private sector, investing in institutionalising partnerships and real networking between the government, civil society and private sectors.

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INTRAC training

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Organisational Development

27 February - 2 March 2012 Location: Oxford
Course fee: £999 non-residential/£1250 residential

The issue of how to develop the capacity of their organisations is high on the agenda for many managers and senior practitioners in civil society organisations. This course is designed for those with some experience of organisational capacity building who wish to use organisational development as a planned learning process to improve organisational performance and self-awareness. The course will provide a range of tools and models for understanding organisations as well as designing and facilitating processes of organisational growth and development.

Impact Assessment

5-7 March 2012 Location: Oxford
Course fee: £550 non-residential/£700 residential

NGOs and CSOs are under growing pressure to assess the impact of their development efforts. They need to be able to justify their spending, learn to become more effective and, not least, to be accountable to their stakeholders. This course explores some of the different approaches to impact assessment that can be used by NGOs; the value of planning for impact; and how to build impact assessment into existing structures and systems. It also offers an opportunity to experiment with a number of tools and methods, and with how to use findings for organisational learning.

Monitoring and Evaluation

19-23 March 2012 Location: Oxford
Course fee: £999 non-residential/£1250 residential

M&E is an essential component of international NGOs, NGOs and civil society organisations striving to continually improve their work and have greater accountability. Given the high demand in the sector, this course is designed to develop individual's understanding of what M&E entails, why it is so vital, and, crucially, how to do it well and in a participatory way. The course ensures that those who are new to M&E have a thorough understanding of M&E concepts and have built up the practical skills and the confidence needed to do M&E effectively. Participants will learn to use a range of M&E tools and activities that will help them improve accountability, learning and effectiveness of projects and programmes.

Advanced Partner Capacity Building

26-30 March 2012 Location: Oxford
Course fee: £999 non-residential/£1250 residential

International development and civil society organisations have been working to support the capacity development of their partners in a variety of ways. Some have chosen to develop specific partner capacity building programmes, whilst others are integrating this support into their ongoing sector or thematic programmes. Whichever approach is taken, there is a need to ensure appropriate support provision by tailoring initiatives towards the specific characteristics and needs of the partners. This five-day course will provide an opportunity for experienced practitioners to strengthen their expertise in the design and implementation of partner capacity building programmes.

Advanced Monitoring and Evaluation

21-25 May 2012 Location: Oxford
Course fee: £1045 non-residential/£1295 residential

This popular course explores M&E in greater depth. It builds on each individual's understanding and skills of how to develop sustainable and cost effective monitoring and evaluation processes and practices within their own projects, programmes and organisations. It is also relevant for those trying to improve and enhance current M&E processes, or supporting partners to develop and implement effective M&E. The focus is on ensuring M&E contributes towards improving organisational learning and accountability.

Child Rights-Based Approaches

11-13 June 2012 Location: Oxford
Course fee: £595 non-residential/£745 residential

This course provides participants with a clear understanding of how to use a child rights-based approach to develop and implement projects and programmes that contribute to improvements in children's enjoyment of their rights to participation, protection, survival and development. The course will cover a range of areas including understanding childhoods, human rights and children's rights principles and provisions, using UN Conventions to achieve change for children, understanding and applying a human rights-based approach to development in different contexts and cultural settings and identifying ways in which participants and their organisations can implement child rights in their own work practices.

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