



Whatever Happened to Civil Society?

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What is civil society?

Civil society holds the key to real change, social justice and better distribution of the benefits of development. The aim of INTRAC's 2008 conference, 'Whatever Happened to Civil Society?', was to reinvigorate our understanding of civil society and our contribution to genuine development – beyond official development aid.

Civil society as defined in the aid industry

Civil society is larger and more important than international development cooperation (or aid). Although this assertion is often stated by aid actors, it is rarely implemented in practice. Aid policies and relationships are designed for donors' vision of an ideal civil society organisation (CSO): a sympathetic actor who represents the values of citizenship, accountability and participation. Among aid agencies, working with CSOs is considered to be a means to an end: however donors have defined their objectives, CSOs have often been deployed as a means of achieving them. As the development discourse has changed, so has the desired role of civil society. This has led to a situation where 'civil society' in practice has become synonymous with professional NGOs who master the aid industry's terminology and ways of working.

Definition of civil society: *"A sphere of social interaction between the economy and the state, composed of actors and organisations that self-organise to advance collective goals."*
Cohen and Arato, 1992

After nearly three decades of civil society work within the aid industry, two things are worth noting: formally registered CSOs have increased dramatically around the world, but civil society has not delivered on what its advocates once promised. Civil society actors are increasingly dependent on aid funding, lack broad social roots, and are often seen locally as self-interested. There are concerns about aid undermining local capacity to affect change, rather than strengthening it. Partly because of the failure of civil society to live up to its ideal, development aid is turning away from civil society and back towards supporting state structures.

Rediscovering the essence of civil society

This is why INTRAC's conference presented a range of civil society representatives, to revitalise the concept and remind us of the multitude of possibilities for affecting positive change.

We need to rediscover the essence of civil society. We need to restate the case for civil society as more than the capacity of some organisations to deliver on donors' current programme priorities. We need to ensure that development agencies – especially those from civil society – are not complicit in perpetuating the structures that underlie poverty and inequality by ignoring wider political constraints and promoting unsustainable solutions.

Beyond labels – functions of civil society

To do this, it helps to consider civil society not by the type of organisation or the sector in which it is active, but based on its functions in society. INTRAC has identified five functions of civil society:



Aroma Dutta, Belinda Coote and Brian Pratt open the conference

1. **Generating the social basis of democracy.** Civil society extends democracy to the grassroots – protecting minorities against majority rule; from the smallest sports group to national-level movements. You can't have democracy only at the national 'elections level' if people at the local level don't have experience of democratic ways of working – negotiating, compromising, taking larger perspectives than their own. This happens as a normal part of associational and civic life and builds a culture of democracy.
2. **Promoting political accountability** beyond party politics. Civil society counterbalances dominant interests and power structures by monitoring the elites' conduct on various issues. Citizens have the right to speak – in theory – but this is learnt in practice by activists in the myriad CSOs that remind political leaders that they hold decision-making power only in as far as they live up to their responsibilities to the people.
3. **Producing trust, reciprocity and networks.** Gathering together in civic communities – horizontal structures between people – is important not only for organising e.g. cultural clubs, local associations and religious communities. It also builds relationships, or social capital, between people and links individuals from different institutions. Trust, reciprocity and networks are used to solve common problems.
4. **Creating and promoting alternatives** through collective action. Whether at the level of ideas or in practice, new ideas, activities, institutions and socio-economic solutions often arise through civil society.
5. Supporting the **rights of citizens** and the **concept of citizenship**. The concept of a contract between state and citizen is much older than the rights-based approaches that are more commonly used in development. Citizenship assumes that the state has to earn its legitimacy from its citizens. When representing different citizen interests, civil society engages with the state on a practical level in advocacy and lobbying. Citizens come together to persuade the government that their issue is important – that the state should deliver on legally confirmed promises. Where the state doesn't acknowledge citizens we get totalitarian states.

Much of development sees itself as a technical, not political, process. But change is intensely political. Hence it is crucial to keep sight of civil society as a long-term development actor, creating the possibilities for political change. It will contribute to poverty reduction and equality through providing the structures, competencies and state-citizen balance needed for sustainable and equitable development.

With this in mind, INTRAC called for case studies of civil society in action – and chose 40 examples to present their cases at the conference. These case studies and overarching presentations are discussed in this report. All the presentations and case study papers (five pages long) can be downloaded at www.intrac.org/pages/cseventmain08.html

Keynote speech – Civil society in the third millennium

Aroma Dutta from PRIP Trust in Bangladesh gave the keynote speech to the conference. In her presentation Aroma drew on her experience of decades in development to point out the changes to civil society that she sees on the ground in Bangladesh.

Some of the problems that civil society faces relate to: too much emphasis on technology and restrictive ways of understanding civil society knowledge; lack of linkages between institutions; and resources constraints. Bangladeshi civil society's ambitious 1970s goals of betterment for all and economic reform soon ran into government resistance – and few CSOs have been strong enough to withstand the pressure and remain on their own path. NGOs often speak on behalf of their members rather than mobilising people to speak on their own.

Aroma's snapshot of the problems of we face reminds us what we have to work on to reinvigorate civil society.

What do you think you are talking about when you talk about civil society? Concepts and interpretations around the globe

This session teased out what concepts we think about when we hear ‘civil society’ and the much-used related words ‘non-governmental organisation’ and ‘community-based organisation’. The concept has deep roots in civic history in **English** and **French** – but what about in **Bambara**, **Russian** and **Urdu**?

Richard Holloway and his colleagues from the Aga Khan Development Network led the session on translating and sharing our interpretations of civil society. The conference participants divided into groups who speak the same language. Each group wrote down the terms for civil society organisation (CSO), non-governmental organisation (NGO) and community-based organisation (CBO) in their own language. We then translated these terms – and how they are understood – back into English to be discussed with everyone.

Although many languages have translations that correspond to the original English or French terms, there were some interesting and revealing reinterpretations – which in some places should make foreign partners rethink how they introduce their organisation!

Old and new forms of associations

Several interesting patterns emerged. In many languages there is a nuanced understanding of the different types of groups and the relationships between them – especially in countries with traditional forms of associations, and countries with a heavy aid/NGO presence. **Amhara** (spoken in Ethiopia) distinguishes different types of CBOs, for example *mahibir*, *iqub* and *idir* and groups them as ‘a gathering of people with a common purpose’. This is distinct from CSOs or *mahibera s’ebaawi* – ‘a gathering of people or organisations with a wider social purpose’. **Urdu** uses *falahi idara*, for NGO – a welfare organisation. But Urdu also has a traditional view of NGOs – *mohzzab muashirat* – a socio-ethical concept of welfare with a holistic view from classical texts. In contrast, **Finnish** uses the same term for all three types of organisations – *kansalaisjärjestö* or citizens’ organisation.

Slick NGOs, rooted CBOs?

The term ‘NGO’ was quite often seen as something negative – technical and distant from ordinary people. In **Bambara**, a Malian language, NGOs are considered ‘those who make projects’. In **Bangladesh** many people think that NGOs are the same as micro-credit. In **Mongolian**, NGOs are formal and new whereas CSOs take traditional forms, such as elders’ committees, citizens’ assemblies, *khurals* or groups of herding households.

The word for NGO in **Chichewa** from Malawi is *bungwe la chitukuko* – understood to mean ‘service delivery organisation’. CBOs or *bungwe la chitukuko la kumudzi* are understood in relation to NGOs – they are village-based organisations whose purpose is to get funds from NGOs to the village. In **Setswana**, a Botswanan language, a CBO depends on the community but an NGO stands on its own – for better or worse.

NON-governmental organisations

In many countries the acronym ‘NGO’ has a stress on the first part, ‘non-governmental’. Rather than being understood as ‘not to do with the government’ it is interpreted as ‘anti-government’. And in many such places, civil society is indeed quite antagonistic to government. In **Kyrgyzstan** the government associates NGOs with



Funders, voice, projects, protest, service delivery – some associations with civil society.

Drawing by L Lönnqvist,

www.developmentalcartoons.com

* Of course, our translations depend on a small number of individuals so the translations may not be understood in this way by all speakers of the language.

ideas like ‘Western spies, grant-eaters, self-interested, scandal-ridden, destabilisers’, whereas ordinary people might say ‘progressive, credible, defenders of human rights and justice’. Similarly in **Russian** one sub-set of NGOs is ‘public organisations’, often seen as anti-government – and including informal associations such as clans or the mafia. This echoes the academic concept ‘uncivil society’. In Kenyan **Swahili** NGOs are called *mashirika yasiyokuwa ya serikali*. They distance themselves from government and are, hence, trusted by the people.

In **Indonesia** the term for NGO, *yasan ikatan* or *ORNOP* is considered to be a corrupt business group, anti-government, or professional association. To counter this image the government has coined the term *kelompok* or *LSM* or self-help groups, to avoid the anti-government stigma of NGOs.

Some good news

But it’s not all gloomy. *Sushil samaj* or CSO in **Bengali** denotes ‘everything that is trying to be good’, although it may also mean being confrontational and political – and *sanitty sanghatan* for CBO is a loose term, but always with a positive interpretation.

Challenges for civil society

What are the current and future obstacles facing civil society? We asked representatives of international NGOs (INGOs), official donors, CSOs in conflict situations, and social movements their views.

Challenges for INGOs: Harry Derksen, ICCO

The division between the haves and the have-nots in the world is as deep and disgraceful as ever, as shown by the many crises of 2008. To these we can add the ‘crisis of the development sector’: we have been unable to change the structures that keep societal divisions in place and perpetuate poverty. Having promised that we can solve these problems, we have to respond to our constituents and politicians who question the effects of our work. Our standard answer, ‘the problems of poverty and injustice are complex and need long-term involvement’, is no longer convincing. We have to admit that the present international aid system is not able to fulfill its mission and is in dire need of reform.



Harry Derksen and Roy Trivedy

Who sets the agenda?

The rise of civil society came from the ‘rolling back of the state’ agenda – leading many NGOs to change from opposing state policies to substituting for the state. The costs of this reorientation are substantial: political dependence and weakened relationships with our target groups. INGOs now need to let these target groups set the agenda. We should accept that the responsibility for change in Southern societies is not with us but primarily in the hands of Southern civil societies.

Throwing more money at development aid is not the answer. Instead we need to ensure that government policy agendas from North to South include the interests of poor and excluded people. In the coming years a new world order will be discussed. International NGOs should influence these discussions and ensure that the global agenda includes the outsiders.

The major challenge: changing our institutions

Marketisation of aid has led to increased competition amongst INGOs and between INGOs and national NGOs; fragmenting efforts and weakening political power of southern civil societies. Redefining our role, devolving decision-making power to the South, will have serious consequences for our institutions. Can we change our institutions? One of the problems in reform is that we have no guarantee for success. Development means change and change means taking risks. In the Dutch private sector, 20% of all business go bankrupt in their first year. This fear for failure may be a reason not to change. But as Dutch entrepreneurs know – if we don’t change and stay idle, we become irrelevant and eventually disappear.

Challenges for official donors: Roy Trivedy, Civil Society Department, DFID UK

Considering changing global trends, the key challenges for donors are:

- Relevance to peoples' lives
- Results: without results there's no support
- Effective public communication.

These changing global trends include:

- Financial and economic crisis
- Food and fuel prices
- Increasing global population and pressure on resources
- Increasing urbanisation
- Climate change and extreme weather events
- Increasing numbers of people hooked on energy-intensive consumer lifestyles
- New models of global leadership.



Idil Seytanoglu and Chiku Malunga

The landscape for development is also changing:

- Chronic poverty and the 'Bottom Billion'
- Fragile and conflict-affected states
- The largest numbers of poor will be in middle-income/emerging economies
- Increasing inequality within and between nations
- Increasing pressure on resources
- Climate change and energy insecurity.

However, with these challenges come new opportunities:

- Promoting financial stability, sustainable low-carbon growth paths and trade
- Tackling climate change and energy security
- Building effective international institutions ('new multilateralism')
- Responding more effectively to the needs of fragile and conflict-affected states
- Harnessing innovation in technology and research
- Improving gender equality.

Official donors also need to work more effectively together with new allies and partners, and maintain and build public support for development. Development should be seen as investing in global public goods: peace, justice and equality.

Challenges for post-conflict civil society: Idil Seytanoglu, consultant, Northern Cyprus

Cyprus has been uniquely divided for 30 years: the Greek and Turkish Cypriots were separated in 1974 and were almost entirely cut off from each other until 2003. Idil described the challenges of running a civil society strengthening programme in close collaboration with a Greek Cypriot partner organisation and INTRAC.

Over the 18-month Cypriot Civil Society Strengthening Programme (CCSSP), Idil and her counterpart Nadia Karayianni worked hard with their teams to overcome the entrenched animosity and propaganda between their communities. This happened largely by mixing people from the two communities on the many CCSSP training courses, consultant and training workshops and events where they had to work together:

- producing social trust
- creating working relationships
- forming networks.

During the programme the participants learnt more about each other and overcame some of their reservations. Some found colleagues from the other side who were working on the same issues – bird conservation and ADHD support, for example. Some found long-lost neighbours from their village before the division. Although there is still a long way to go before Cypriots in general feel ready to take steps closer together, there were many bi-communal relationships forged on the personal level. These are the kinds of relationships that civil society can stimulate, and thus build real bridges across divides.

Challenges for social movements – ‘Section 65 vs the Budget’: Chiku Malunga, CADECO, Malawi

“Ants united can carry a dead elephant to their cave”.

Chiku told the rousing story of how ‘ants’ – an unlikely social movement of students, business, NGOs and ordinary Malawians – defeated the Malawian Parliament’s internal power games over Section 65 that were holding up progress in the country.

In 2007, opposition parliamentarians refused to ratify the annual Budget unless Section 65 – curbing the majority party’s power – was passed. This led to deadlock in Parliament – and in the country’s finances. No government expenditure could go ahead without a ratified Budget. The country almost ground to a halt.

Malawians rose up against the state’s failure to execute its duty: some formed the group ‘Concerned Citizens’, including Chiku as a ‘background’ organisational development expert. Concerned Citizens called loudly for Parliament to abandon their struggle over Section 65 and to ratify the budget.

The leaders of Concerned Citizens were clean leaders – Malawi had seen too many recycled leaders, the same people who repeatedly claim to represent people. Nobody had seen the leaders of Concerned Citizens before: they connected with peoples’ values, they had legitimacy. They were not NGOs. Their relationship with people was transformational, not transactional.

Concerned Citizens used mobile phones to mobilise people – and coordinate the whole country. Messages about the movement and protests spread quickly by SMS.

This was an exceptional situation as the social movement was protesting against the opposition, rather than the government. Chiku found that because of this, they gained plenty of support: free TV time on state channels, telephones, police protection – government officials phoning them up saying ‘how much do you want?’.

After many rounds of arguments between Concerned Citizens and parliamentarians, the opposition backed down and ratified the Budget. Malawian people had stood up against politicians and won. Chiku’s main lessons are:

- **Relevance** – the issue was centrally important
- **Leadership legitimacy** – clean leaders without another agenda
- **Transcending NGO-isation** – avoiding the inertia and bad reputation of NGOs
- **Leveraging technology** – in this case, mobile phones
- **Space to operate** – government support helped the movement achieve its aim.

Faith in civil society

This session examined three examples of faith-based organisations (FBOs) in civil society action.

Key points:

- Legitimacy is less a problem for FBOs as they get their support and funding from their own constituency groups
- Religious values are central to FBOs, and supporter groups can be mobilised at times of crisis
- FBOs sometimes have a 'clash of ideologies' with northern funders.

Reverend Dr Moiseralele Prince Dibeela from the United Congressional Church of South Africa spoke about the church delivering development and changing according to new times in South Africa and Botswana. The church has a wide reach into far-flung communities, and they are adapting to the HIV crisis.

Karim Sajjad Sheikh gave us highlights from his PhD research at the University of Essex. Karim has compared 12 faith-based and secular CSOs in Pakistan and Bangladesh. His example showed that both faith-based and secular organisations contain corruption and discrimination and depend on outside support – development funds and *zakat*, respectively.

Finally, Dr Gerard Clarke from Swansea University presented a collaboration between two NGOs of different faiths: the United Methodist Committee on Relief from the USA has worked with UK-based Muslim Aid on humanitarian aid. Gerard found that FBO cooperation across faith or community lines can defuse inter-communal tensions before they turn violent.



Karim Sajjad Shiekh, University of Essex

Civil society and the global financial crisis

Talk about the aid system is all well and good, but what about the current news – economic upheavals around the world? Will this finally discredit neo-liberal economic thinking globally, or will the strongest players use the crisis as an excuse to focus even more on their own benefit?

Relaxing at the end of the first day, the conference participants could delve into this question during a discussion between three eminent civil society thinkers: Asiya Sasykbaeva from Centre InterBilim in Kyrgyzstan, INTRAC's Brian Pratt, and Rajesh Tandon from PRIA in India. Areas that were touched on were:

- Issues of poverty and climate change risk being overshadowed by financial considerations and disappearing from the global agenda
- The distinctions between public and private sectors are blurring
- Aid budgets risk being cut or frozen
- Redundancies in the commercial sector may create a new labour force for civil society as disillusioned workers turn to something more rewarding.

The crisis also brings opportunities for civil society:

- Renewed scope for lobbying international financial institutions
- Becoming more informed and literate about financial systems
- Shifting our mindset from aid to economic space and structures.

Civil society has not been part of the problem – but now it needs to be part of the solution.

Civil society promotes the social basis of democracy

The case studies on the first function of civil society – promoting the social basis of democracy – came from different country contexts. Some sessions took the perspective of civil society in states under pressure (e.g. Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Zimbabwe), others were from civil society in middle income or transitional countries (Ukraine, Paraguay), others from new, emerging or constrained democracies (Kyrgyzstan, Iran, Syria).

The 13 case studies dealt with civil society as an agent for democratisation and peoples' participation in political processes that affect them. Another important aspect of 'Function 1' is that people learn democratic working methods at the personal level through their engagement in civil society.

Key points to emerge were:

- Small steps can lead to progress.
- To understand civil society we have to understand the state better: why do they behave the way they do?
- Overlap between civil society and politics, as happens, in for example, lobbying or coalitions, is not always negative – provided it is done in a transparent and conscious manner.
- External support can change discourses.
- Technocratic, funding-driven, 'projectised' approaches undermine civil society's potential to create political change.
- Civil society should be vigilant so it doesn't reproduce (rather than change) social norms and values in countries under stress.
- It is difficult to balance internal and external legitimacy (accountability to members or to outside stakeholders).
- Civil society has multiple identities – but can also promote shared interests.



CSOs should do both advocacy and service delivery.

Drawing by L Lönnqvist

Highlights from the case studies

Civil Society in Ethiopia: Beverley Jones, CAFOD, UK

Donors supporting civil society organisations in the South often assume that governments in those countries operate out of self-interest – while forgetting that governments in their own countries also operate out of self-interest, especially in promoting a particular type of liberal democracy. This mutual suspicion often creates tension between the state in the South and the CSOs working in their countries as these are seen as agents of Northern interests. The paper also concluded that by giving more financial support to international NGOs working in these countries, the local NGOs are left weak and without a strong voice.

New philanthropy in India's North-East: Monica Banerjee, National Foundation for India

You need to invest time and energy into the local context before you can take up advocacy work. Also, advocacy with the local state in the North-East just doesn't work. A big national NGO like PRIA can have good connections and will be listened to by national powerholders in Delhi. But local organisations and schools won't be listened to by the local state.

As CSOs we should do service delivery before advocacy: if we do a good job and show the government how it can be done, our advocacy message for better services will be much more powerful.

Civil society promotes political accountability beyond party politics

The presentations dealt with the various ways in which civil society promotes political accountability outside of party politics and the ballot box. The different sessions covered:

- defending human rights (The UN, Gambia, Latin America)
- accountability, legitimacy and performance-based management (grassroots activists, INGO field offices)
- influencing policy (Bangladesh, the Philippines)
- civil society and the media (human rights, community radio and child rights).

Key points:

Accountability and performance:

- Failing forwards: being able to fail and learn from it
- Our obsession with project cycle management is weakening local accountability and legitimacy
- Are we losing our ability to engage with the grassroots? It's becoming increasingly harder.
- Are we being exclusive – are the rules of NGOs too complicated for everyone?

Civil society impartiality and human rights:

- The media can be a tool for transparency and rights – but it's important to remember who owns the media and what their agenda is. How can communities take control of the media?
- Beware of co-optation of CSOs by states that embark on state-led human rights reviews
- Human rights processes are important – not just outcomes. But they need local participants and supplementary interventions.
- CSOs should not be intimidated by the global architecture of rights – we should take rights into our own hands
- There should be a more level playing field for all civil society actors, and more space for non-conformist CSOs.

Highlight from the case studies

Privileging citizens' voice over noise: Reality Checks and their implications in Bangladesh: Dee Jupp, consultant

How can the lived experience of common citizens reach the highly politicised worlds of NGOs and government in Bangladesh? Few CSOs have been able to resist integrating party politics into their activities. Also, many NGOs with a rights agenda are based in urban areas and have little connection to poor people – and international donors face a similar disconnect.

Dee Jupp has worked on two Reality Check listening exercises that follow poor people for a long period of time, sending researchers to live in their homes for several days and nights at a time, and have low-key, informal conversations. This Reality Check is funded by the Swedish government over five years from 2007.

Many poor people are intimidated by the politicisation of NGOs. There are also many, such as disabled and elderly people, who don't participate in 'participatory' exercises. The Reality Check also gives a better opportunity to understand the context of peoples' opinions. The Swedish government is part of the donor consortium engaged in the SWAps (sector-wide approaches) for the education and health sectors in Bangladesh. Hence the Reality Check findings have been incorporated into the SWAps: a significant level of policy influence. But what is really needed is a space that allows more diverse CSOs to be created, so that some of them can connect to poor peoples' reality.

Producing social trust, reciprocity and networks

Being active in civil society can in itself create the underpinnings of a better society: through creating relationships and linking groups of people. This is also known as social capital. The case studies delved into different relationships between actors in society and ways for CSOs to interact with the private sector, the public sector, and each other.

The presentations included:

- Social movements
- CSOs' relationships with states, INGOs and donors (Suriname, China, Sudan and Kyrgyzstan)
- Civil society and the private sector (Nigeria, India and Palestine)

Key points:

Social movements and sovereign organisations:

- Supporting sovereign organisations to be really sovereign should be a core purpose (not a means to an end)
- Don't try and keep a social movement (or network) alive when it has reached the end of the road
- Social movements can make positive use of new technologies, cultures and the arts
- Rather than do capacity building with local organisations we should encourage horizontal links with other CSOs. Capacity building can produce 'clones'.

CSOs' relationships with states, INGOs and donors:

- Analyse how power structures are changed by civil society interventions
- Do political parties legitimise or delegitimise CSOs?
- For CSOs to challenge political parties they need to have the trust of the community and politicians.

Civil society and the private sector:

- Some of the motives of the private sector 'doing development' include integrating into the communities/governments until the time comes to exploit natural resources; often corporate social responsibility is linked with PR and brand management.
- Ways for the private sector to relate to the community include: 'Backyard philanthropy' (keep peace around factory); 'Trusteeship' according to Gandhi's model – the obligation of wealth to give something back; and brand consciousness/PR to support your own consumers.
- Civil society has to engage with the private sector. This can take different models – not necessarily partnerships. There can be confrontation, or cooperation with or without corporate funding of civil society.
- What are the accountability mechanisms for the private sector? Is shareholder pressure the only way? The UN global compact is only a voluntary standard.

Highlights from the case studies

Civil society and the private sector: Oil exploitation in Nigeria: Carol Ballantine, Trocaire

This case study highlights the work of the Ecumenical Council for Corporate Responsibility (ECCR), a UK membership organisation which works to promote corporate responsibility in companies and the churches. ECCR has a focus on UK multinational companies' impacts on host communities, livelihoods and the environment, especially in developing countries. The Centre for Social and Corporate Responsibility (CSCR) is a movement established in Nigeria in 2001 in response to the conflict triggered by the oil extraction business in the Niger Delta. Working together, these two organisations have succeeded in accessing the highest levels of Shell Oil to articulate the rights of the people living in the Niger Delta. This case study described the partnership between ECCR and CSCR in targeting Royal Dutch Shell in Nigeria, and went into further detail on the strategy of ECCR to tackle issues of corporate accountability through networks of faith-based shareholders.



Participants discuss the key points of the session

Creating and promoting alternatives

Whether at the level of ideas or in practice, new ideas, activities, institutions and socio-economic solutions often arise through civil society. This freedom to evolve ideas can also present challenges to liberal democracy – there are no value judgements about what *kinds* of alternatives civil society creates. It is the area where ideas compete with each other. Some of these will be incompatible and require negotiation across and within civil society as well as with the state and market. These case studies show civil society alternatives – to traditional ownership and class, to war, and to communications.

The presentations included:

- Space, land and housing (housing in Argentina and landless in Bangladesh)
- Rethinking violence and power (unarmed protection in Sri Lanka, and women as leaders)
- Information communication technology (ICT) and civil society (African women's rights and Indian agricultural livelihoods)

Key points:

Space, land and housing:

- It is fundamental that poor people experience the process of getting justice for themselves.
- Confronting the state needs to be balanced with providing alternatives.
- For most poor people land is more than an economic commodity. It is also about identity, meaning and dignity.

Rethinking violence and power:

- Women improve development outcomes in innovative ways – it's worth finding out more.
- Creative approaches tend not to be replicable. Each situation is distinct.
- Practice what you preach in terms of gender in your own management.

ICT:

- ICT is useful for reaching advocacy audiences and publicising grassroots experiences.
- People have the knowledge – no scientist is needed.
- ICT is already used widely in Southern countries.

Highlights from the case studies

Local movement supporting the landless in Bangladesh: Arifur Rahman, Research Manager, Manusher Jonno Foundation, Bangladesh

The Right to Land movement in southwest Bangladesh is a people-centric approach to ensure the rights of thousands of landless and land-poor. In this region many powerful and rich community members have seized land illegally from the rural poor, mainly for lucrative shrimp production for export. Since 2004 Uttaran, a local NGO based in Satkhira, with 10 other local grassroots organisations, has facilitated a strong land movement. By increasing awareness and organising the landless into groups, the movement has contributed to developing social capital. The movement has led to the redistribution of land to the rural landless. A total of about 28,000 people have benefited directly from the project. This has been achieved through the mobilisation of the local population, including NGOs, local government, media, academia, lawyers, journalists and the wider community.

ICT and women's rights in Africa: Karoline Kemp, Hivos and ISS, the Netherlands

The Solidarity for African Women's Right (SOAWR) coalition has used Pambazuka News, an online newsletter, to advocate for the ratification and popularisation of the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa. While the analysis has shown that Pambazuka News has indeed played a role in publicising women's rights and the Protocol, further actions are needed to have a real impact. This is not to say that the usage of ICTs is misplaced – for African NGOs to be effective and integrated into an inevitably globalised civil society they must have access to this important means of communication and network building. Working across wide physical spaces and in varying contexts means that the potentials that exist in creating an online community that can provide support and a sense of cooperation is invaluable.

Honesty, justice and opportunities

Kumi Naidoo – former Secretary General of CIVICUS, Co-chair of GCAP (Global Call to Action against Poverty)

We have to ask ourselves, in a conference like this, how many times have the words ‘justice’ ‘power’ and ‘equality’ come up? These need to be inserted firmly into the language of civil society in the future.

We need a kind of democracy to create an enabling environment for the exercise of civic agency. The very people who have been preaching to us good governance, freedom of association etc, have over the last seven years, in particular since the war on terror, decimated the political space.

Democratic space is being crushed in many parts of the developing world – like Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union. We have to break the link where ‘democracy equals elections’ in mainstream thought. At the moment donors can say “Ok, you’ve held elections, have some budget support.”

We can think about change at different levels:

Macro – governance change

Meso – policy change

Micro – direct delivery of services.

Most civil society resources go to the micro level.

In terms of time, it takes longest to make changes to governance, then policy changes – service delivery

changes can be much quicker. The temptation is to do more work on service delivery, because of aid modalities. But a lot of what we do is amelioration and doesn’t change power relations. We don’t address issues of structural change that are necessary.



Kumi Naidoo

On civil society partnerships

Just because you’re born in the South, you don’t necessarily have more legitimacy – nor should those in the North feel guilt about privilege. The difficulty is that we are all dishonest with each other. We aren’t prepared to talk about the power differentials between ourselves. To call ourselves partners is a joke. Partnerships are based on a certain measure of equality. Counterparts would be a better word.

Use the crises

We have seen the privatisation of profits and a socialisation of losses. This is an injustice that we need to talk about. Fifty thousand people die every day from preventable disease – it’s a silent genocide. We have been talking about how 500 billion dollars would wipe out third world debt. We used to think this was a huge amount of money. But we can now see that this is small change compared to the trillions used to bail out the banks.

The challenges are huge, but the time we are in now is the time for civil society – if we are coherent and together enough to milk it for all it’s worth.

Supporting the rights of citizens and concept of citizenship

The state has to earn its legitimacy from its citizens. The idea of citizenship takes rights-based approaches further, and looks at peoples' activities to claim their constitutional rights. In its function of representing multiple and overlapping citizen interests, civil society engages with the state both at a theoretical level as well as at the practical level – in the form of civil society lobbies for specific interests, services, legal and other protections from the state. In return, the citizen and civil society accept the legitimacy of the state.

The presentations included:

- Social citizenship and the city: The housing movement of Sao Paulo
- Active citizenship in Central America
- Citizens with HIV/AIDS in Peru

Key points:

- Claiming citizenship requires engagement from the state
- 'Participation' takes many forms – depending on space and power relations
- People can co-opt the language of government (e.g. laws and rights constitutions)
- Civil society should be liberated from technical definitions to embrace diverse forms of social mobilisation
- What happens to social movements when they fulfil their objectives?



Highlights from the case studies

Active citizenship in Central America: Towards a 'strong public'? Barry Cannon, School of Law and Governance, DCU

'Strong publics' means civil society as opinion formers *and* decision makers, "self managing institutions of different kinds [which] could become sites of direct or quasi-direct democracy co-existing with representative forms" (Fraser 1994). Barry takes this perspective on civil society in Central America. Central American civil society must play a part in a reappraisal of the global economic system and make alternative proposals.

Barry outlined two Irish Aid-funded projects on such 'active citizenship' with regional universities in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras. See www.ciudadania-activa-ca.net

The first project is a research and advocacy project to influence the adoption of pro-poor policy measures by building more effective CSO networks on a national and regional basis. Examples include: women migrant social networks in Central America, and human rights of migrants in Nicaragua.

The second project, on capacity building, aims to influence policy on poverty through joint civil society–local government partnerships.

Despite problems – waning commitment from members, a long and cumbersome process, conflicts of interest – the initiative managed to create spaces for new discussion on Latin America in the context of globalisation.

Achievements:

- Various spaces for regional discussion and networking
- Coordination between universities and research units
- Funding eight research projects.

The Active Citizenship Programme must now move towards promotion of a 'strong public' by facilitating:

- Research to create alternative proposals
- Spaces for discussion and dialogue – within universities
- Engagement with policy makers **and** with the wider public – especially poor people who seek spaces for participation.

We will...

What will we do next? This session split conference participants into groups of stakeholders: small-scale NGOs, international NGOs, academics and think-tanks, official donors...In this way groups could decide on ways forward that are appropriate and feasible for our different roles.



Local NGOs

This means NGOs that are based in the same country they work in.

1. We are the social basis for democracy. As local organisations we need to reflect and see what we can do, e.g. creative partnerships with political parties, donors, the private sector. Also, thinking about the education of others and ourselves about what civil society is – and on the foundations of what democracy is. It should be an organic process that focuses on the long-term to help empowerment of others. Part of our work is consciousness raising (which you can't measure) but it makes social change happen.
2. Citizenship is not the relationship between citizenship and the state – that's in the past. Our global society is changing and becoming transnational. Citizenship is the relationship between you and something else. Not between people and the state, or a relationship between regions and other networks.
3. Our new paradigm is 'Citizenship 2.0' (interactive) – a dynamic process. What about 'Civil Society 2.0'? There is complexity but a lot of room for transformation.
4. Personal responsibilities – the question is not just the system and paradigms. The system of financing large NGOs and accountability to governments means financing the elite ends – and they merge with the government. But small NGOs have allowed this to happen.

International NGOs

International NGOs are NGOs that have activities in many countries, or fund partners in many countries. Many of them are actors in aid networks: receiving funding from donor countries and in turn funding partner organisations.

1. What is our role as INGOs? There's no clear answer, but it's something we have to consider very carefully.
2. We need a better understanding of the local context and the power relations in that context.

3. Enhance the credibility and legitimacy of local civil society.
4. We should understand the role of the field offices better and have a concrete discussion. Overcome our institutional interests and focus on common goals.
5. Is our approach to growth in line with what we want to do? Do we just want to grow and grow because we think it will make us stronger? Will becoming bigger facilitate what we want to do?
6. We should support movements for change. INGOs' interventions into a particular country is through NGOs, but we should look at how NGOs can work with broader aspects of civil society organisations.
7. We should open up to collaborate with other actors. Not just development actors, but with other actors from the global scene – demanding accountability from global financial actors.
8. We need to get out of the comfort zone and take some risks. Working with government, people end up not raising challenges to each other. Without taking risks we can't expect that change will happen.
9. We need to create a platform to discuss the aid chain that we are all fed up with.



Donors

The donor groups included official agencies from donor country ministries, multilateral institutions, trusts and foundations.

1. Results – we have problem with tracking and managing results. But this is important from a donor perspective.
2. Synergy and coordination can be improved through harmonisation.
3. Include small and medium NGOs. Some of these are threatened by lack of funding.
4. Increase downward accountability of NGOs to the people they are trying to work with and for.
5. Follow up on the Paris Declaration – its priorities need to match local priorities.

Other civil society groups

This group included participants from CSOs that are not NGOs, and from other groups with too few representatives to form a group of their own – e.g. churches and local government.

A common theme was to get civil society organised and recognised as an official forum representing citizenship to work on the following issues:

1. Financial sector, governance and management. We are the victims of the present crisis of the financial sector. Are we going to be taken into consideration in the decision-making processes to deal with this situation?
2. Environmental sustainability and labour privatisation.
3. International trade – civil society wasn't taken into consideration in the trade agreements in Latin America.
4. Full compliance of government to all formal legal instruments – environmental sustainability and many other agreements. Civil society has to push for this.

Academics

This group included those doing primarily 'thinking work' on civil society – researchers from universities and think tanks.

1. We need to use complex language to appeal to academic peers to get promotion and grants, but we also have to make knowledge readable and usable. This is the role of think tanks and INTRAC. But we should avoid tabloid simplification of issues and recognise that there is a complexity here that shouldn't be oversimplified. We have to find a way of communicating this.
2. We have a role in the landscape of development to be independent, and critical, and to tell it how we see it. Some NGOs and movements have received insufficient criticism. Sometimes those in the business who have to commit to programmes may not be able or have time to criticise. But we need to be critical in ways that are relevant and be committed to the process and idea of civil society. Some of what we do will be demand-driven, it will be what people in the policy and practice field want to understand and will ask us to help them understand. But it's also part of our role to be putting things onto the agenda that policy makers and practitioners wouldn't want on the agenda.
3. We need to be more focused on states in action. How do they actually perform? Political actors can't be ignored. We have to understand that politics is about contestation, and people involved here are political actors. We need to know what interests and motivates them, and the alliances they form.
4. A lot of civil society activity, of the 'aided' kind, is crowding out other activities. Is aided civil society activity crowding out non-aided civil society activity? Is it occupying the state when it has the privilege of funds to do so? There is a huge internal threat of civil society potentially killing itself.

Beyond civil society: civic-driven change

Professor Alan Fowler, Institute of Social Studies, the Netherlands

Does your job determine your citizenship? No. Then why should your job determine whether you are part of civil society or not? It doesn't. The concept of civil society can be understood better as 'civic agency' – not depending on who pays your salary, but whether you are taking steps to change your society.

We need to think about 'aided' civil society and 'not aided' civil society. The vast majority of civil society is non-aided – it looks after itself. We've been instrumentalised at the cost of self-determined identity – results have been determined by the measures of the measurer, rather than the measures of the measured. Beyond aid, civil society and civic agency are political categories: about changing the society you live in and about creating a future based on a collective vision.

Alan has worked on the Civic Driven Change research project for a year – see:

www.iss.nl/cdc and www.thebrokeronline.eu

Civic agency is about self-organisation – doing it unaided. Civic-driven change is directed at the interface between citizens and politics; is sensitive to power; operates across institutional boundaries, and relies on citizens' self-organisation and links to the 'local'. Civic agency does not inhabit a third 'sector' – rather, it is a fundamental feature of socio-political processes and relational identity towards a state and other citizens.

Implications:

- The cutting edge is where multi-institutional 'civic citizenship' and the politics of society meet
- The task is advancing the principle of democracy – citizen control over public authority
- The challenge is to advance civic agency from within all of a society's institutions.



Alan Fowler

On aid and civil society

Aid is political – aid has been incorporated into international relations and is associated with defense and diplomacy. If you look at where poverty is, that's not where aid is – aid is concentrated by politics. CSOs have agreed to play this game. Aid has grown historically into an instrument in the international relations story. Today, poverty overseas is interpreted politically and economically as 'terrorism at home' (or as immigrants and breaks in the supply chain). Now, we need aid to make sure that poverty over there doesn't create instability at home.

We need to do more from the perspective of building capability to understand and navigate power and do less of the administration of development (reporting, etc). We need to help organisations become more robust at dealing with uncertainty. Uncertainty is going to increase as the world becomes more connected – and we need to become resilient.

Three crises: an opportunity to challenge and recreate

Geof Wood, Professor of International Development, University of Bath and Chair of INTRAC's Board of Trustees

To be outstanding, this conference needs to inspire continuous action and follow-up.

This is a key time for citizenship and agency.

The world is at another one of its crossroads. Anxiety and fear are widespread. There's a covariance of crises – a number of crises coming together. We are preoccupied with the financial implosion which reveals how interrelated our survival is.

The financial implosion comes from unaccountable, venal greed. We've all been caught up in this, looking for advantage and security. The financial crisis is bad for many, but it's also a wake-up call – an opportunity to reset values, forms of capitalism and economic behaviour. We need to critique the capitalist crisis. It's coinciding with climate change and food insecurity.

“Civil society has been engaging in the Faustian bargain when it didn't need to – co-option in this quest for more significance. The state dictates the terms on which it will be exposed to critique from civil society. We have to be aware of hegemony – civil society should be the space of freedom. Tendencies towards regulation shouldn't lull us into sacrificing liberty and freedoms.”

The search for security crosses international borders: we're all in the same pool of risk now, in a world of intense global uncertainties. This series of threats caused by the crises requires political management, and it's the form of political management that should be of interest to us.

The powerful will try to use the state and political institutions to protect themselves. This is going to affect human rights, human security and human development. This means threats to fundamental freedoms and liberties – the space where citizens seek to exercise agency. There are opportunities here to alter the terms of the contract between citizen and state. We've been talking about *struggle* but without using the term.

The agenda now should not just be about defending capitalism, with marginal adjustments. The agenda shouldn't just be about saving neo-liberalism – this is an opportunity to be part of a large project to define types of fairer society.

Civil society isn't just a manipulated victim, but has been a willing collaborator in the process of our incorporation and emasculation. Civil society has made a Faustian bargain when it didn't need to: co-option by the aid system in a quest for more significance. The state now dictates the terms on which it will be exposed to critique from civil society. We have to be aware of this kind of hegemony because civil society should be the space of freedom. Tendencies towards regulation shouldn't lull us into sacrificing liberty and freedoms.

Civil society must argue for new deal options, but at the same time resist the concentrations of state power that might accompany them. Civil society must bring these issues into the political domain and resist insidious technocratisation, because they are about rights, entitlements, security and distribution.

Our alliance has to be global because the capital alliance is now global. Global civil society has to be continuously vigilant about declining democracy. This is a new agenda for all of us. You may win one victory but you can't then relax, because the powerful will keep coming at you. We need continued mobilisation and we need to keep our guard up.



Reflections

“Civil society is part of every individual – it’s not about formal structures. It’s about being a citizen and thinking about how you can make life better for yourself, your community and the world generally.”

Konstantin Kovtunets, Knowledge Management Advisor, INTRAC Central Asia

“Capacity building is important for donors. But we have learnt that INGOs are hopeless at building the capacity of Southern-based NGOs. They just can’t do this, although they gave us this as their main rationale for existence. What is the capacity required for Southern NGOs? It is to engage with governments and other stakeholders in national society. The managerial and technical stuff is not the key. As donors, we will have to be prepared to support a different type of capacity building for Southern-based organisations.”

Naresh Singh, Director General, CIDA

“I was looking for a talk about what went wrong and what we will do about it. I’m happy that we’ve been able to do this. We’ve managed to create a type of community that I’ve not had the opportunity to do recently. We have to take this community creation forward. I have been impressed by the candid talk. We’re diverse but we’ve been able to talk openly about issues.”

Grace Isharaza, East Africa Regional Programme Officer,
Aga Khan Foundation/Development Network

“Civil society isn’t a marginal part of society. It’s at the heart of our society.”

Brian Pratt, Executive Director, INTRAC



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