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Conference Analysis Report

Civil Society Support: Is Community Development the Way Forward? 18–20 April 2005 in Amman, Jordan

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The Link between Civil Society and Community Development

The key question raised in the conference title, as to the potential beneficial link between civil society strengthening and community development initiatives, stimulated discussion throughout the three-day event in Amman, Jordan. This debate was considered from two different angles: whether community development could strengthen civil society and/or whether civil society strengthening programmes supported community development. The consensus that appeared to emerge was that community development can strengthen civil society and vice versa, but that the link is not automatic. Such mutual strengthening will only happen if it is planned for and if the individual community development programmes are supportive, rather than counter-productive to society as a whole. Particular examples from the conference showed how community development does not always assist in strengthening civil society, particularly where an instrumentalist approach was adopted.[1] In such cases, community development may achieve immediate service delivery goals, but little beyond this. By extension it would appear that the move by many international NGOs to stimulate the formation of local community-based organisations (CBOs) will not necessarily be part of a civil society strengthening agenda, if the real focus is to achieve externally predetermined aims.[2] Furthermore, the goals and priorities of a community may change over time; thus organisations created for specific external needs (to act as a delivery mechanism) could become irrelevant when circumstances change.

Discussions from the conference suggested that genuine attempts to expand and build upon local capacities (or competencies) are of greater value than the creation of CBOs by external agencies. In terms of sustainability it was concluded that it is perhaps more important that people learn how to run an organisation, or mount a local campaign, for example, than it is that the local CBO is 'sustainable' as an identifiable organisation in the longer term. This, we realise, goes against the act of faith underlying much community development which is premised upon the establishment of structures for the long-term (*our* CBO, *the* village committee). Eventually, useful forms of organisation will emerge, but these may be in a different format from those envisaged by external supporters. What seems to be

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[1] An instrumentalist approach would be one in which community development is regarded as a vehicle through which to achieve other specific aims such as provision of a service, like water or a health clinic. This contrasts with a more empowering approach that sees community development, in itself, as a process that will develop the independence of communities and their ability to engage in and direct their own developmental efforts, rather than being dependent on external bodies.

[2] Thus too many agencies seek to create their own CBOs and we find communities with a plethora of specialised committees often named after the external agency.

crucial for both immediate and medium-term community development, and for providing the foundations of civil society, is that communities of people (citizens) have the capacities to organise around issues and needs that are important to them. This is more important than whether a single organisation is sustainable, as many organisations at community level may indeed survive, but will become less relevant and less dynamic over time.[3]

On the other hand, it is clear that not all civil society programmes support community development nor is this always their intention. Many focus rather on formal democratisation, for example, and concentrate on voter registration or judicial reform. There are also other élite-based forms of civil society strengthening that do not in themselves lead to direct gain or involvement of poor people (e.g. formation of political parties, press freedom etc. may eventually indirectly benefit poor communities, but this is not guaranteed). It was argued by some conference participants that democratisation programmes still need to show more evidence that they actually contribute to poverty reduction, rather than simply assuming this. Lack of evidence of causal links between certain forms of civil society support and enhancing the living conditions of poor, marginal and excluded groups is a serious issue and calls for more research in this area. If impacts cannot be demonstrated, then a major assumption underlying civil society support through formal democratisation would be challenged.

Context

The conference discussions frequently stressed the importance of recognising difference, and indeed, uniqueness, of the contexts within which community development is undertaken. However, interestingly, despite this general conclusion, once participants began to discuss the details and the policy environments in which they worked, a great many similarities emerged. Some of these similarities resulted from having common sponsors (donors, advisers) but others reflected the natural rhythms of working at community level, despite apparently very different contexts. Problems of the lack of participation, of basic education hampering the formation of CBOs, of élite co-optation and of gender imbalances, were amongst the common challenges and experiences of participants.

Hi-jacking

Political parties often attempt to 'hi-jack' the agendas of CBOs by enticing their members to support a particular political party. Single party governments over the years have been particularly guilty of this. As a result, in some parts of the world, it is not surprising to learn that local populations reject new attempts to 'organise' them, having only just thrown off the straitjackets imposed by central governments. Such attempts to control CBOs have been successful in the short term, but few such attempts have survived the test of time. Rather, this has served to temporarily submerge local organisational forms. The problem for development workers is that in some situations, attempts to work with communities are thwarted by suspicion of external control and a desire to hide activities from local government.[4]

A more recent form of 'hi-jacking' is perceived to come from multi-lateral and other foreign development agencies (including NGOs). Concern was voiced by conference participants who felt that there is a move afoot to turn CBOs into frontline deliverers of services and projects that are externally determined by larger organisations. Whether the service itself is

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[3] Examples of organisations that have lost their *raison d'être* are numerous. Semi-moribund organisations which provide little are also common.
[4] This has been noted in the course of recent INTRAC work in Ethiopia, and the Former Soviet Union.

worthy or not, a problem arises when it dominates the energy and focus of CBOs which might, given more free reign, have taken a very different path. Several of the papers at the conference examined the changes in the division of labour which seemed to be occurring in the 'aid chain', and the impact of this. Concern was expressed by the authors of several of these papers that such changes are masking a move to 'de-politicise' both community development and local civil society development, increasing the focus on local service provision, thus avoiding the need for engagement with difficult political issues at the national level. The decision by large official agencies to broaden and increase funding to community driven development programmes was seen to have some positive effects. However, it could also become a cause for concern if it led to these agencies ignoring wider policy issues that should be addressed at national level (such as resource distribution and policy on social and sectoral priorities).

Bringing Gender Back into Civil Society Debates?

Thematic group work on gender and community development introduced a challenge to the models many of us use to understand and situate civil society. At first it was noted that very little gender analysis addresses issues surrounding civil society, and very little of the literature on civil society integrates gender as a component. Discussion then highlighted the way that conceptualisations of civil society have shifted over time. Early analysis posited four interlocking social systems: i) the state ii) the market, iii) the 'third' or 'value-driven' sector, and finally iv) the household. Curiously the 'household' category was later dropped (possibly when the 'third sector' category was replaced by the now commonly accepted term 'civil society'). Previously it was recognised that the household, as the basic unit of social analysis, was key to understanding the other three sectors. Thus, the opportunity to analyse and work with groups within the household, and to note the links between different interests in the household and the other sectors. In other words, the opportunity for gender and generational analysis was previously included within the model. The term 'civil society' came to the fore as better suited to the model than the term 'value-driven sector', which was misleading and unclear. However, the term 'civil society' has its origins in political science, and as such it places the focus on political and organisational units, rather than the personal. In so doing, suddenly the household as a category no longer seemed to fit the overall model and was allowed to disappear from the debate. This, it was suggested, entailed the loss of the personal (i.e. gender and generation) from most models of civil society strengthening.

The Nature of Community

Although the conference tried to avoid getting side-tracked into definitional debates, one did come back to haunt us: the perennial problem implicit in the use of the word 'community'. Many community development programmes embody an idealised and imaginary vision of a (probably) rural, cohesive, homogenous group with shared interests, history, current circumstances and future goals. In reality, geography seldom demarcates shared interests except in specific and sometimes quite narrow senses, for example, access to sewerage or water or sharing of access roads. Often class, caste, gender, generation, and occupational categories cut across a geographical definition of 'community'. The failure to define community in specific contexts was felt to be one of the weaknesses of many community development programmes. Therefore it was recognised that civil society is more than the sum of 'communities'. Many organisations may be at sub-community level (see household discussion above), others cut across and go beyond traditional community boundaries.

Concluding Remarks

Ends and means

Throughout the conference we saw a tussle between those who feel that community development is a means to other ends, (provision of services, infrastructure construction etc.) which will bring results in the short term and could, in the longer term, provide the basis for civil society, and those who saw the strengthening of community-based organisations as an end in itself because of the advantages brought about through empowering communities, enhancing local accountability and reducing dependency on external decision-making processes.

Power

A great deal of the work that goes on around community development and civil society centres on analysing and challenging power relationships. There seems to be little agreement as to when is it acceptable for development agencies to challenge the status quo and in what ways. One participant asked why is it acceptable to challenge some forms of inequality (for example, landlessness) but not others (such as gender) for fear of offending local cultural sensibilities.

Clarifying and setting objectives

There is a need to clarify what we want to achieve with greater overlap between civil society strengthening and community development. Whilst there was general agreement that these two areas of work can be complementary, a question remains as to how this can be achieved. At the moment many programmes fail to clarify why they are working in the way that they do and what objectives they aim to achieve. A great deal of confusion remains as to the relationship between strategic level questions and the practical 'how to' level. Clearly much can be learnt about what does and does not work in a practical sense, yet a lot of effort has been exhausted on projects which achieve little because their overall aims were never clearly stated. Our conclusion is that community development and civil society strengthening work can be mutually supportive, but we must be clear about how these synergies between them can be achieved in practice.

Synthesis and cascade

Alan Fowler sought to synthesise and consolidate the main issues from the conference presentations and discussions by distilling them into 'Seven Lists' specifying seven key factors that need to be engaged with when considering how community development may be undertaken in such a way as to promote civil society strengthening. He argued that this can be achieved first by recognising the main drivers that encourage people to organise collectively in CBOs. This requires in-depth local understanding of the affinities that bind people (such as kinship and race as well as shared conditions, experiences, risks and aspirations). Harnessing the ability of CBOs to contribute to civil society strengthening also requires awareness of the characterisitcs, histories and particular features and structures that diverse CBOs take and how these shape, enhance and constrain their capacity in terms of the broader goal of civil society strengthening. A third key element highlighted in the seven lists is the need for awareness of context – not only the institutional landscape, (e.g. types of community-based organisations and civil society groups already in place) but also the broader social, cultural and political context (including international aid behaviour) that CBOs must respond to in such a way that is strategic and tactical. Developing the capacity of CBOs for civil society strengthening involves moving away from more narrow and instrumental conceptualisations of capacity building to a focus on investing in human

capabilities, fostering psychological empowerment of CBO members whilst enhancing political awareness and the ability to be politcally strategic. Fowler suggested that CBOs move between different levels of change – moving from a more narrowly conceived focus on effective internal functioning towards organisational autonomy and political engagement. However, it was acknowledged that this process is not always linear as is often assumed in the civil society literature and that there are likely to be periods where CBOs may disappear altogether and re-emerge in a different form and that the experience gained from these processes is cumulative.

The lists also highlighted the major theories and principles surrounding capacity building for civil society strengthening. Bodies of relevant literature include that on democracy, collective action, social capital, institutional development and organisational change. The principles upon which civil society strengthening is based include: iteration, flexibility, management of unpredictability and uncertainty, organisational ownership of the change processes and the principle of 'organic' development of CSOs. The issues tackled in this domain included instrumentalist approaches versus rights-based approaches along with deeper questioning as to who determines the agenda as to what capacity is and what it 'should' be. The seventh element of the lists consolidated discussions relating to methods and measures for civil society strengthening – methods included: participation, learning by doing, leader focused change, skill training and deeper self-assessment by those involved in facilitating these processes. Methods enabling the capture of more indirect or 'wider' impacts of capacity building processes were also highlighted. For example, focusing on evaluating the residual capacity that 'remains in people' beyond the CBO and the ability to use indicators to assess the stages of movement of CBOs towards civil society strengthening.

Each conference participant was given a copy of the lists. They were then organised into 15 groups of four, to begin 'cascade' discussions. The cascade methodology involved dividing up all the participants into random groups of four, who then spent around one hour discussing what they believed to be the key factors behind community development for civil society strengthening. They were required to write down four factors on four sheets of paper. After this each group of four joined one other group, and looked at the eight factors between them. At this stage the participants had to negotiate and decide, what combination of four factors, out of the eight in front of them, that they would take into the next level group. Finally, groups of 16 were formed, and participants negotiated their final priority four factors.

One aspect that is interesting to analyse from this exercise is not only the final factors that were prioritised at the very end of this exercise but also which factors were lost and how others were negotiated during the course of the cascade. For example, after the first stage in this process the initial list highlighted amongst other factors that the concept of gender is significant – e.g. 'it is important to facilitate an environment that allows men and women to participate on equal terms'. By the second stage however, this factor was no longer so highly prioritised and was absent from the lists by stage two. Quite how this should be interpreted is not clear – perhaps it speaks more of how gender is perpetually lost from the debates on civil society strengthening more than anything else! Another element that no longer featured by the end of the second stage was the prioritisation of 'innovative and appropriate interventions and tools'. This is easier to interpret as it suggests that by the second stage, tools were seen merely as instruments rather than catalysts for change in themselves and by dropping this as a factor those engaged in this exercise chose to prioritise instead the deeper underlying objective of these interventions – i.e. human development. By the end of the second stage, in essence the major factors appearing on the lists could be reduced to the following elements: (i) importance of the internal/ external context within which CBOs operate; (ii) the need to encourage wider alliances between CBOs, communities, the private sector and local and national government; (iii) capacity building strategies should be based on the social and the psychological and on enhancing human capabilities; (iv) the need to ensure that interventions fit with community needs and

priorities. Other factors that were prioritised in stage one but then were lost by the end of the second stage included that of a focus on encouraging diversity and a focus on fostering good leadership. Again, loss of these factors is somewhat ambivalent. At the third and final stage of this exercise the final list of factors that emerged overlapped very closely with the elements highlighted above but were worded slightly differently: (i) the need to ensure that context analysis is undertaken; (ii) importance of developing linkages and networks to influence policy by adopting a strategic and transformative (what some might call 'political') agenda to community development; (iii) ensuring that strategies are flexible and sustained over time and for the wider environment to be conducive and supportive; (iv) building trust and genuine motivation by all actors and ensuring that community development is based on priorities as defined by the community and that they also own the process of bringing this about in practice. In the final analysis, this exercise revealed that after much negotiation as to which factors should be prioritised, there was a very broad consensus that these final factors should be privileged. As such they (together with Fowler's seven lists) stand as the key messages deriving from this conference that need to be taken forward in such a way to guide and shape future policy in this area.