

Concept Note

CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and their engagement in policy processes.

Background

The last 15 years have seen significant changes in the relationship between the Civil Society and policy makers in development contexts. Different trends have led to a changing working environment for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs):

- *Democratisation and reduction and transformation of violent conflicts*

Democratisation has been the most striking and most important trend. Along with substantial reductions of violent conflict (drops in socio-economic turmoil and threats to personal security) this has led to improved environments within which CSOs can work.

- *Shaping a fair economic globalisation*

Markets are spreading and economies are increasingly open. This has brought new actors into political processes and created demand from governments, private companies and civil society for policy inputs. Globalisation involves risks and violence for the poor, particularly when development objectives are not an integral part of the process; in many cases, it has eventually displaced livelihood without offering alternative options locally.

Trans-national Companies, including from the South, in search of efficiency through global supply chains, have boosted market integration and mobility of people, goods and finance beyond boarder control, though unevenly. Rule-making in the multilateral systems critically lags behind. Current rules are still the inheritance of egregious power imbalances. They lack coherence across sectors and tend to be skewed to the advantage of industrialised countries. Poverty and geo-political instability are directly related to the lack of access to markets, knowledge and resources. Custom duties and non tariff barriers in industrialised countries as well as emerging markets further limit the scope for developing countries to get a share of the world economy. The pursuit of a fair globalisation envisages rules that are supportive of sustainable development and designed with the informed participation of developing countries.

- *Information and communication technologies (ICTs)*

The rapid development of ICTs has transformed access to and use of information and knowledge. The availability and cost of accessing information has fallen providing new ideas and catalysts for action.

- *Government decentralisation*

Decentralisation and devolution have increased citizen participation and promoted civil society activity as people have responded to opportunities to influence decisions that affect their lives.

All these trends are significant and generally positive for CSOs, and they have resulted in considerable changes in the contexts faced by many CSOs.

Despite this there is increasing concern that the *war on terror* is leading to an increased politicisation of international relations. There is also less emphasis in some developing countries to ensure open political contexts and engage with civil society groups.

The Concept of Civil Society

We understand the term *Civil Society* very broadly, meaning 'the groups and organisations which occupy a position between the household, the private sector, and the state, to negotiate

matters of public concern'.¹ This definition of *Civil Society* includes, among others, community groups, NGOs, research institutes, think tanks, advocacy groups, trade unions, academic institutions, parts of the media, professional associations, and faith-based institutions.

The Roles of Civil Society in Policy Making

Civil society organisations play an important role in development, complementary to the roles played by governments and the private sector. Civil society organisations provide checks and balances against institutional power of governments and particular interests. Their role is based on the following three pillars:

1. Building Voice and Accountability

Civil society organisations help build effective and accountable states and supports voices for change by being active in the following fields:

- (i) **Policy formulation:** Empowering and representing the poor and other disadvantaged groups in policy formulation at local, national and global level.
- (ii) **Monitoring state services and budgets:** Improving state services through monitoring, demanding transparency and accountability, and ensuring inclusive access to services.
- (iii) **Conflict transformation:** Providing a voice for communities and ensuring that they, as well as governments, are accountable. The positioning of civil society can make a distinct contribution in resolving conflict.
- (iv) **Global advocacy:** As many decisions and rules are negotiated on the global level, global civil society organisations and campaigns play an important role in shaping fair globalisation processes.

2. Providing Humanitarian Assistance and Services

Civil society organisations can play an important role, particularly in fragile states, by delivering services to poor or disadvantaged people and developing new innovative approaches to reduce poverty and foster social and economic justice. It also has an important role to play in responding to humanitarian crises ensuring human security. Civil society plays an important role in the following areas:

- (i) **Provision of services:** Civil society can play an important role in service delivery, supporting universal provision of services and ensuring that duplications and uneven access and distribution are avoided. However, to reach this goal, civil society's service provision should aim to fit within nationally and locally owned strategies.
- (ii) **Humanitarian aid and service provision in difficult environments:** If there are no nationally agreed strategies and therefore serious gaps in provision (especially in emergencies, conflicts and fragile states), civil society often steps in to fill the gaps and ensure human security.
- (iii) **Developing new approaches:** Civil society can play an important role identifying, piloting and replicating innovative approaches to service delivery whereby service provision can also provide a basis and legitimacy for civil society to advocate for changes in the delivery of government services.

3. Promoting Awareness and Understanding of Development

A strong national and global development community is important for building public support for development, contributing to policy debates and the knowledge base for development, as well as holding the international community to account. Civil society can be present in the following areas:

¹ This definition is taken from DFID's Information and Civil Society Department website (www.dfid.gov.uk).

- (i) **Influencing government policies and participation:** Many governments are committed to consulting with the public and the civil society in order to strengthen accountability to taxpayer's and the public confidence in the use of public resources for development measures.
- (ii) **Creating a knowledge base for international development:** Through research and analysis, policy debates and operational experience, civil society contributes to the knowledge base which is crucial for functioning of the international development community.
- (iii) **Skills development:** Civil society makes a substantial contribution to the national and international development skills base. Particularly the opportunities provided by volunteer organisations can help motivate individuals to want to work in this field.

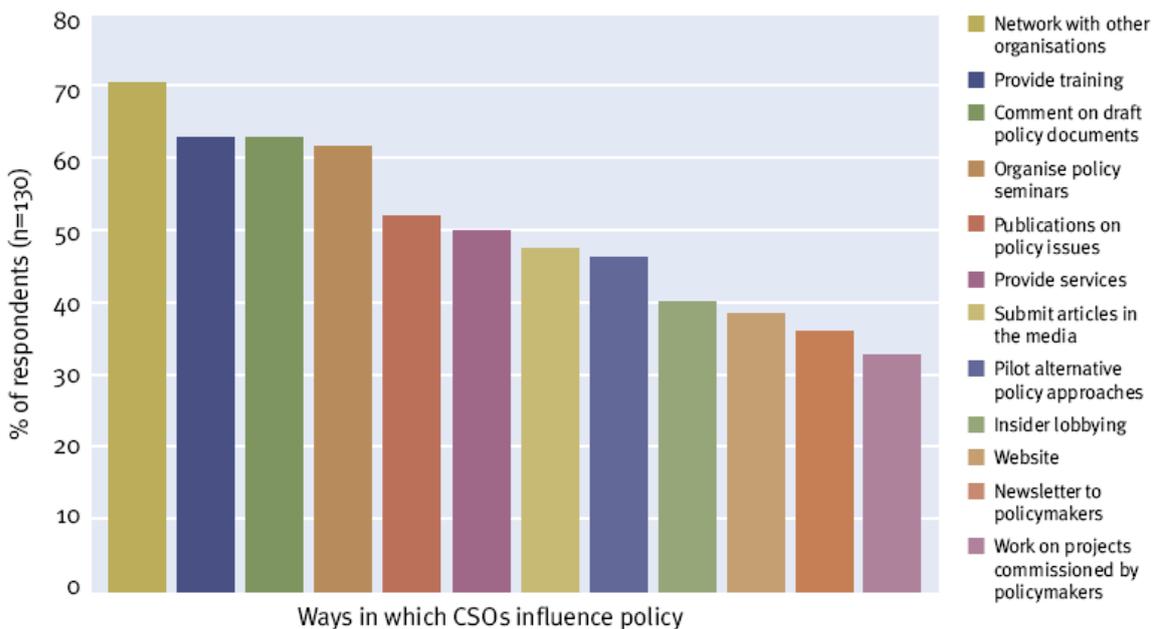
Civil Society: From Contestation to Policy Influencing

Policy Influencing as the New Paradigm for Civil Society

As mentioned above, the operating environment for civil society organisations is improving in an increasing number of countries. At the same time, many CSOs have become aware that policy engagement can lead to greater pro-poor impacts than contestation. Many more CSOs are moving beyond service delivery. We see more and more examples of CSOs engaging in informed advocacy as an important route to social change and a means of holding governments to account. Sometimes this is leading to impressive outcomes.

For many CSOs, policy influence is a part of their organisation's agenda. In a survey carried out by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI)², the average CSO was working to influence between four and five different policy issues. The main areas of work were governance and rural livelihoods, with education, health, gender and economic policy issues also important. And CSOs are using a range of different approaches to try to influence policy (see figure below).

Figure: How Organisations Seek to Influence Policy



Source: Kornswieg, G., D. Osborne, I. Hovland and J. Court (2006) *CSOs, Policy Influence, and Evidence Use: A Short Survey*. London: ODI.

² Kornswieg, G., D. Osborne, I. Hovland and J. Court (2006) *CSOs, Policy Influence, and Evidence Use: A Short Survey*. London: ODI.

Obstacles for Civil Society Engagement in Development Policies

Despite evidence of more open and accessible policy contexts, recent assessments highlight that CSOs are often failing to influence policy processes in developing countries.³ Civil society and the state often live rather separate lives, with governments continuing to set the policy agenda much on their own.

Based on the literature, case studies, participatory workshops and their own survey, ODI identified a number of key reasons why CSOs have limited influence on development policies:

- **Adverse political contexts constrain civil society policies**
Despite advances in political freedom, many developing countries have contexts that constrain civil society activities and their engagement in policy processes. Policy processes are inherently political. Therefore, contestation, institutional pressures and vested interests are highly significant, as are attitudes, capacities and incentives among officials. Not only can policymakers be resistant to CSO engagement in policy processes, they are also often resistant to evidence.
- **Civil society's limited understanding of policy processes**
CSOs often have a surprisingly limited understanding of policy processes. As a result, they fail to provide the right advice to the right people in the right way at the right time.
- **Civil society's inadequate use of evidence**
Many CSOs dispose of a wide range of evidence. Using this effectively could help ensure their own work is more effective, that they have greater access to policy processes and that policymakers are more informed by relevant evidence. However, evidence is still adequately used by CSOs. Also that they are aware of the importance of evidence, they often do not know what type of evidence will be most influential in a specific case or situation (i.e. soft vs. hard evidence).
- **Civil society's poor communication**
Many policymakers bemoan the inability of CSOs to make their findings accessible, digestible and in time for policy discussions. CSOs often do not take into consideration the importance of the way they deliver their advice to policymakers.
- **Weak links to other actors**
Most CSOs acknowledge the importance of networking for their policy engagement, but they work together all too rarely – caused partly by a perception of competition for funding and influence, partly by the reluctance to engage across boundaries.
- **Technical and financial capacity constraints**
Many - mostly smaller CSOs – do not have enough technical and financial capacity to properly engage in policy processes and use evidence effectively.

Approaches for Effective Policy Engagement by Civil Society

Based on the above mentioned obstacles, different potential solutions for more effective policy engagement have been worked out (see table below):

³ E.g.: Robinson, M. and S. Friedman (2005) *Civil Society, Democratization and Foreign Aid in Africa*, IDS Discussion Paper 383. Sussex: IDS.

Key obstacles to CSOs	Potential solutions for effective policy engagement
External	
Adverse political contexts constrain CSO policy work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campaigns – to mobilise the political will necessary to improve development policy and practice • ‘Boomerangs’ – working via external partners to change national policy • Pilot projects – to develop and test operational solutions to inform and improve policy implementations
Internal	
Limited understanding of specific policy processes, institutions and actors	Conduct proper context assessments . These enable a better understanding of how policy processes work, the politics affecting them and the windows of opportunity for policy influence
Weak strategies for policy engagement	Better strategy would help CSOs to identify critical policy components (agenda setting, policy formulation and implementation, monitoring and evaluation) and the different engagement mechanisms.
Inadequate use of evidence	Better evidence could help CSOs have a greater impact on policy processes. CSOs need to ensure that their evidence is: relevant, objective, credible, and practical.
Weak communication approaches in policy influence work	Better communication aids CSOs in making their points accessible, digestible and timely for policy discussions. Two-way communication is critical. CSOs should use existing tools for planning, packaging, targeting and monitoring communication efforts.
Working in isolated manners	Network approaches help CSOs make linkages and partnerships with other stakeholders.
Limited financial and technical capacity for policy influencing	CSOs need a wide range of technical and financial capacities to maximise their chances of policy influence. CSOs need to build their own capacity or access it through networks.

Source: Adapted from: Court J. et al. (2006): Policy Engagement, How Civil Society can be more effective. Overseas Development Institute, London.

Resources

Court J. et al. (2006): Policy Engagement, How Civil Society can be more effective. Overseas Development Institute, London. (www.odi.org.uk)

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Mendizabal, E. (2006) Understanding Networks: The Functions of Research Policy Networks, ODI Working Paper. London: ODI.

Sutcliffe, S. and J. Court (2006) A Toolkit for Progressive Policymakers in Developing Countries, RAPID Toolkit. London: ODI.

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