

NEWS AND VIEWS ... from ICSW

National and international NGOs

I am taking this opportunity to review changes that are influencing the directions of non-government organizations both at national and international levels. Countries providing development aid are placing increasing emphasis on recipient countries determining their own development priorities (Accra High Level Forum, 2008). This increases the importance of civil society being part of policy setting and the budget processes within countries.

National NGOs

ICSW has promoted the work and role of national councils of civil society for at least 50 years. National councils are variously known as national member organizations, national umbrella organizations, national coordinating councils and national peak organizations. National councils form the core membership of ICSW. ICSW has run training courses for national councils in Africa, South East Asia and the Black Sea countries. The training focuses on strengthening national councils in the development of policy and influencing government budgets.

In recent times there has been an increasing international interest in national councils participating in the political processes of countries that are eligible for Official Development Assistance (ODA countries).¹

International NGOs

International NGOs (INGOs) are becoming increasingly active in the politics of ODA countries. This has led to some uncomfortable relations between indigenous NGOs and INGOs.

In a paper on Southern civil society perspectives on international aid, the Overseas Development Institute states, 'While not strictly part of the official aid system ... INGOs nonetheless have become increasingly important actors in aid relations given the large sum of international development assistance they command and their large presence in

Africa, Asia, and Latin America alike ... However, the impact of INGOs can also be overwhelming for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) at the local level. INGOs increasingly have come to be perceived as competing unfairly with local CSOs for financial and other programming resources, as well as undermining the growth and effectiveness of an independent and autonomous indigenous civil society sector' (Menocal and Rogerson, 2006: 20).

To remedy this situation, the authors suggest improving discussions between NGO decision-makers in donor countries and Southern CSOs. In their conclusion they ask 'Should there be a code of conduct for Northern CSOs?' (Menocal and Rogerson, 2006: 22). This is a good question, but if it does happen will the CSOs from donor countries let CSOs in ODA countries be the determinants of the policy?

INGOs 'have grown fantastically in the past two decades, and they pose questions for whom they speak – on anyone's behalf other than their own? To whom are they accountable for the positions they advocate and does it matter? Do they represent anyone other than themselves?' (Anderson, 2008). Anderson is not alone in questioning the legitimacy of INGOs. The Report of the Secretary-General in response to the report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations (United Nations General Assembly, 2004) has sunk without trace within the UN system. The Panel unfortunately did not seem to have anticipated the very strong resentment and resistance to civil society having an interactive role with the United Nations. The review of civil society relations was an opportunity lost by civil society.

INGOs have become a force in international relations and international development. But is it reasonable that they claim a legitimate role in representing the interests of indigenous civil society?

International NGOs and national NGOs

This is not the first time that indigenous civil society has been confronted by influences from donor countries. In the 19th and 20th centuries (and earlier) Christian missionaries were the first INGOs competing for the hearts and souls of the local populations. Missionaries were part of Northern colonialism and worked side by side with occupying powers and commercial interests.

INGOs can be seen as the successors of the missionaries. Within ODA countries the INGOs are selling, not their brand of religion, but their brand of development and poverty alleviation. They compete for resources from donor governments and communities and compete for

the allegiance of local populations and ODA governments for their brand of development.

In ODA countries indigenous NGOs are aware that INGOs are competing for their allegiance. Today, like the missionaries, the INGOs from donor countries offer incentives to indigenous organizations to adopt their brand of development. This is not assisting the indigenous NGOs in becoming forces for development in their own countries.

The process of gathering allegiance follows the pattern that INGOs from donor countries have adopted in their traditional work. INGOs from donor countries are controlled by the Global North. Their modus operandi is determined by boards drawn from donor countries. They place a policy and administrative grid over the world they work in. They market the same brand in every country.

The big INGOs implant their structures in ODA countries following a globally determined formula. Donor INGOs determine the use of resources in the recipient countries within the context of their global directions.

Some INGOs are now venturing to work with indigenous NGOs, particularly national councils. To date this seems to be following the traditional modus operandi of making resources available within the context of their own constructs.

Strengthening indigenous NGOs

ICSW has argued for the provision of resources to indigenous national councils. Resource allocation by donor governments to enable sustainability of indigenous organizations has been meagre and short term. When it is provided it is project based and short term. Core money is rare. Long term commitment is rare.

In addition to our training courses in strengthening national NGOs ICSW has started a programme of 'North-South' partnerships. The aim is to link an ICSW member from a donor country with a member from an ODA country. The programme works within the principles that a North-South alliance must be long term and the Southern member must determine its own directions within the context of its country and region.

Directions

ICSW would like to see national councils in ODA countries being sufficiently resourced to be effective representatives of civil society in matters of national policy and influence. We see this as a long term

venture which needs the support of donor governments. This conforms to the new development paradigm in which countries determine their own policies and budget priorities. We seek the support of INGOs to work with and strengthen the indigenous national councils.

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Notes

1. The language of development continually evolves as concepts become redundant and are overtaken by new paradigms. The use of the terms 'developing' and 'developed' countries is slipping from acceptable vernacular. The terms have lost value as it becomes harder to align countries as 'developing', 'underdeveloped' or 'developed'. Likewise the use of the terms 'Global North' and 'Global South' have become harder to justify. Countries of the former Soviet Union may be recipients of ODA but they are geographically in the Global North. Many countries in the Asian region are becoming wealthy but they are located in the Global South. They are now referred to as emerging economies (e.g. Malaysia and Indonesia). In this article I use the language of the Organization of Economic Development (OECD) – countries that are recipients of Official Development Assistance (ODA).

References

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