

Emerging trends and civil society

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

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

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

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

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

Challenges to established organisations

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

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

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

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

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Three main issues

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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