HOW BEST TO SUPPORT CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT IN POLICY DIALOGUE?

POLICY BRIEF

The purpose of the evaluation was lesson learning, to help Development Partners (DPs) gain a better understanding of how best to support Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in the area of policy dialogue. The findings also have direct relevance to the CSOs in the three countries studied by the evaluation team (Bangladesh, Mozambique and Uganda) and the wider CSO community, as well as the Governments and local authorities interacting with Civil Society representatives.

This brief paper is not a traditional summary of the evaluation report, but rather focuses on the evaluation's policy implications for and recommendations to DPs with a view to improving their support to Civil Society Engagement in Policy Dialogue.

About the evaluation

This study, the 'Joint Evaluation of Support to Civil Society Engagement in Policy Dialogue' was initiated by the Donor Group on Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness. Specifically it was commissioned by three Development Partners (DPs), ADC/Austria, Danida/Denmark and Sida/Sweden, which form the Management Group. A larger group of bilateral DPs support the evaluation through their participation as the international Reference Group. The evaluation took place between June 2011 and September 2012.

The Evaluation Team was drawn from the consulting firm ITAD Ltd in the UK (lead firm), together with experts from COWI (Denmark) and experts from each of the three countries selected for the fieldwork, Bangladesh, Mozambique and Uganda.

Overall conclusion

Most DPs now acknowledge that CSOs represent the diversity of public expression and as such contribute to effective democratic governance. But the pressures to scale-up disbursements, reduce transaction costs and to produce short-term development results have affected financing available for CSOs.

According to most of the DPs interviewed in this evaluation the aid channeled to CSOs has increased slightly over the last decade, but these pressures mean that this does not necessarily translate into more money available for policy engagement (the majority being used for service delivery and humanitarian assistance). Despite clear efforts to respond to the needs of advocacy-type CSOs, it is concluded that the range of DP funding instruments available is not yet fully appropriate.

Recommendations and policy implications

Promote local and contextual needs rather than donor driven agendas

A common concern of CSOs is the dominance of DP agenda in the support provided to CS engagement. This influence is seen as a threat to CS independence and their own initiatives and runs counter to the concept of vibrant CS being a public good or 'end in itself'. There is overlap in DP support around a rather small range of themes with other key issues marginalised or ignored.

It is recommended that CSOs make more effort to promote local and contextual needs to DPs and that DPs become more responsive to these, rather than allowing global priorities dominate to achieve a more balanced support for areas of policy dialogue in line with local priorities.

It is further recommended that DPs balance their current predominant accountability to their own parliaments and public with accountability to those of the country they support.

Support emerging CSOs with new ideas and methods

Support should be provided not only to effective CSOs (i.e. those which have a track record), but also to those promoting alternative ideas, playing watchdog roles and raising critical voices. The evaluation emphasizes the challenge posed by the fact that CS action worldwide is changing from organisation-based to non-formal and spontaneous. People worldwide increasingly want to engage 'on their own terms' rather than through conventional CSOs such as women's groups, faith-based groups, Trade Unions or local political parties. This has huge implications for aid funding to encourage CS

engagement, suggesting a necessary shift towards greater attention to supporting the enabling environment for engagement, rather than a focus on support of individual CSOs, alongside greater attention to CSO programming that facilities citizen and community empowerment activism.

Develop more appropriate funding instruments

Most DPs now acknowledge that CSOs represent the diversity of public expression and as such contribute to effective democratic governance, recognising that alignment of development aid means alignment with the priorities of the citizens (not just aid recipient Governments). Never the less, present DP policies and funding modalities can limit CSO effectiveness. The pressures to scale-up disbursements, reduce transaction costs and produce short-term development results have affected the financing available for CSOs. Despite clear efforts to respond to the needs of advocacy-type CSOs, the range of DP funding instruments available is not yet fully appropriate.

DPs should undertake a more radical re-think of funding approaches to CSOs, engaging CSOs and INGOs in this process. The needs are likely to include small funds, unrestricted funds, flexible and agile response funds, funds for processes and funds which support the right to initiative. It is recommended that new funding modalities focus on three types of need: Long-term support, specific targeted support and opportunistic right moments.

Be more proactive in influencing the enabling environment for policy dialogue

The evaluation highlights that a country's political leaders (rather than its policies) shape the realities both nationally and at local level, so that the situation facing

CSOs may in practice be very different from the legal provisions. DPs should, in dialogue with national governments encourage enhancements of the enabling environment more generally. This would include taking specific action to improve the regulatory environment in which CSOs operate, as well as promoting the adoption of general democratic principles more systematically across all sectors.

DPs should:
- support steps to directly promote the establishment of invited spaces for CS and CSO engagement
- support steps to enhance freedom of speech and access to information through legislative change and compliance with legislation
- provide support to regulatory bodies so that they transform into institutions which promote and encourage rather than control and restrict third-sector participation
- make resources available for contemporary platforms for engagement e.g. e-governance, productive use of social network and other internet based forms of CS-state interface.

Carry out regular contextual and political economy analyses at country level

A contextual and political economy analysis at country level should be jointly commissioned and undertaken at least every five years by independent research organisations. The analyses should identify the range of CS action including emerging CS actors and provide a basis for more nuanced systems approach for action by CSOs and support by DPs. Based on the review of the political economy, the most strategic approaches and strategic alliances can be identified and supported for their potential synergy and enhanced effectiveness.

Invest in CSO capacity building

A lack of CSO capacity for policy engagement undermines their credibility. DP support should devote more resources to empower CSO capacity to engage in policy dialogue. The recommendation here includes the need for a major shift in the approach to capacity building, which would address the importance of up-grading these skills and capacities by investing in capacity building and equipping for 21st century advocacy (e.g. state-of-the-art provision for computers, internet, mobile telephones and other technological innovations which facilitate information gathering and real-time monitoring of policy dialogue and practice).

Acknowledge that advocacy can be costly

Advocacy and other related policy dialogue work do not generally require a high level of financial resources. However, certain elements of policy engagement such as conducting research, the monitoring of policy implementation, particularly where it requires extensive data collection and travel, and the forging of strategic alliances, can be costly. Often these costs are wrongly categorised as administrative costs when they are legitimate policy-related activity costs. This has important implications for enhancing the funding modalities of DPs, in order that they more properly address policy engagement needs.

Provide funds for public access resources ('Resources for All'), events and processes

New funding modalities should also address the issues of providing support to the range of organisations, movements and spontaneous activism which cannot (or prefers not to) be registered, but which contributes importantly to policy dialogue to enable:

- off-setting the closure of many small fund windows
- provision of resources for local agenda, 'risky' actors and issues; and
- support to a wider range of CS action including small episodic actions which increasingly prevail.

Provide more support to evidence building

Advocacy and campaigning backed-up in many cases with evidence-based research is a well-established feature of CSO strategy. CSOs when staffed with experienced, professionally-qualified experts are capable of producing research material of high quality which is then used effectively in a range of advocacy, campaigning, lobbying or media-related processes.

The majority of the research documents used to support advocacy processes, campaigns or to monitor the outcomes of policies or programmes are funded with DP money. There is potential for significant value added through the strengthening of the capacity of CSOs to systematically generate such information in order to raise their profile and build cases for policy change.

Adopt a long-term commitment and perspective

Policy dialogue outcomes generally take time and the short-term nature of most forms of DP funding is an impediment to building the capacity as well as the social and political capital needed by CSOs to effectively engage in long-term policy dialogue. DP support to advocacy CSOs, which have earned public credibility and trust needs to be secured and should not be subject to the uncertainties of project funding or changing DP priorities.

Develop better results indicators to avoid favoring service-delivery

The evaluation has confirmed the perception that the current demand for results ends up in valuing service delivery over processes of change which take longer and are more difficult to measure. It also leads to a normative interpretation of results.

The measurements methods generally used for CS engagement in policy dialogue are more suited to logic-driven, service delivery-type programmes. CSOs may not always be fully effective in achieving policy and practice change, but that does not mean they should not be supported.

There is a need therefore to measure 'value added' rather than value for money or cost-effectiveness criteria for processes which are subject to such political and contextual unpredictability outside the control of CSOs.

DPs working with CSOs should develop monitoring assessments that

- Identify and use outcome and results indicators which measure a vibrant CS and the CSO contribution to this (to satisfy the claim that a strong CS is an 'end in itself').
- Develop good-quality process tracking tools which CSOs can use to demonstrate their direct contributions to policy dialogue.
- Draw up and disseminate standards of good practice for measuring these changes.
- Develop good documentation (knowledge management) within CSOs and DPs using web/cloud-based storage systems.

**Make DP conditions
less burdensome for CSOs**
Many DPs continue to require CSOs to
adopt their own conditions and require-
ments with regard to proposals, monito-
ring and evaluation and reporting.

Even in joint-funded arrangements,
CSOs are still often required to report
separately which leads to high trans-
action costs. Furthermore CSOs
complain that demands are made of
small, informal organisations which
are inappropriate and detract time
away from their core action.

**Support confrontational
as well as collaborative dialogue**
CS action cannot be expected to achieve
results simply through collaborative
actions with Governments. CSOs have
often accused DPs of being too soft on
recipient Governments and not speaking
out on behalf of CS.

Similarly DPs have criticised CSOs for
not being outspoken enough in invited
spaces. It is appreciated that DPs
operate at the invitation of the host
Governments, but DPs should put more
effort into examining ways in which
they can support controversial issues
indirectly rather than side-step them
completely.

**Support appropriate legal measures
for CS rights**
Promotion of legal measures which will
ensure the necessary freedoms for CS
engagement and support the formalisa-
tion of space for engagement are also
critical elements of the enabling environ-
ment. DPs have made efforts in this
regard particularly by providing support
to oversight bodies, but they may be too
cautious in challenging diminishing
freedoms and the lack of political to
support CS engagement.

**Increase support to independent media
and independent journalism**
DPs should provide an enhanced level
of support to the media, building on
DPs recognition of the key role of the
media in policy dialogue and the use
CS can make of this channel of commu-
nication. Fundamental is the regulatory
framework within which the media
operates. The cases show that that this
is often under threat of increasing state
controls. DP support, both in terms of
finance and voice, to protect the inde-
pendence of the media is critical.

**Invest in building capacity
among DP staff in Country Offices**
Both CSOs and DPs note that the way
aid is managed currently puts huge
demands on individual DP officers and
it is clear that DP officers are less likely
to visit projects and ordinary people than
in the past. DP staff need to understand
the dynamics of the wider CS in order to
advocate on their behalf for appropriate
measures such as invited spaces and
freedom of expression and the current
working modalities limit this exposure.

DP staff, in particular those in country
offices, should improve their knowledge
management in CS engagement proces-
ses through appropriately designed
immersions and in-country orientations.
The turnover of staff should be reduced,
and where new staff are engaged,
sufficient time should be provided for
hand-over among colleagues.

DP staff, CSOs and INGOs should
improve their connectedness to people
living in poverty particularly as the pace
of change is accelerating.