

CSO Networking for Democratic Social Change

Q. What is a civil society organization network?

A. For this paper, the term civil society organization (CSO), as is often the case, is used interchangeably with non-governmental organization (NGO) to mean any independent, mission-driven, nonprofit, voluntary citizens' group. A civil society organization network is a group of at least three CSOs that forms voluntarily to pursue common objectives collaboratively while retaining their own basic autonomy. Common objectives may include information sharing, achieving common social goals or expressing a common identity. When it comes to CSO networks, however, one size or type does *not* fit all. Donors should support those networks best designed to meet their members' common objectives, whether it is an informal coalition established solely to launch a single advocacy campaign or a more permanent network with a formal governance structure developed to strengthen members' long-term common identities and interests (e.g., policy, legislation, etc.).

Why Should Donors Support CSO Networks?

The creation of effective networks can help individual CSOs initiate, consolidate and sustain democratic social change through citizen participation. The following are three critical advantages of supporting the creation and/or strengthening of CSO networks:

- **Impact/Influence:** CSOs often form networks to pursue development-related aspirations that they could not achieve individually. Coalitions and networks can enable CSOs to amplify their voices, thereby achieving greater influence with regard to government actors and decision-making bodies.
- **Legitimacy/Credibility:** By encompassing large numbers and a broad range of social identities, networks tend to lend legitimacy and credibility to CSOs with governments, critical constituencies and the general public. This is particularly true when the net-

works' aims are valued by the societies in which they operate. As networks typically involve their members in some form of joint communication, decision-making and governance, they can also serve as positive models of democratic forms of organization.

- **Protection:** Particularly in harsh operating environments where individual CSOs come under tough scrutiny or even harassment by government security forces, increased strength comes in numbers. Being a part of a larger network can serve to protect smaller CSOs by making them less isolated and vulnerable as well as more visible, particularly when these CSOs are involved in high-profile advocacy activities that may be perceived as critical of the government.

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Civil society networks have become partners of choice for many international development agencies seeking to maximize the reach, scale, and impacts of their programs.

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Dr. Darcy Ashman
Supporting Civil Society Networks in International Development Programs
Academy for Educational Development, 2005

What Factors Determine the Success of CSO Networks?

While effective networks can take many forms depending on their objectives, the authors of *Supporting Civil Society Networks in International Development Programs* suggest that they also tend to share similar characteristics.¹

- **History and external environment:** Successful networks often link together organizations and individuals with “pre-existing social capital”—relationships of mutual trust, experience and norms. In addition, networks formed in societies with liberal social, legal and political enabling environments and established traditions of social networking tend to be most effective.
- **Social aims and technical expertise:** CSO networks whose objectives reflect the values of broader society tend to be successful in mobilizing broad social action. In addition, collaborative action should be complemented by a sound common technical program strategy for network actions; if not, factionalism may occur within the network.
- **Leadership and governance:** As noted above, collaborative CSO networks can strengthen democracy and governance objectives by serving as effective models of democratic processes. Networks tend to work best when their leadership is “collective” and facilitates conflict resolution, consensus-building and joint action. In addition, governance or policymaking should include all members, either directly or through a representational structure.
- **Financial management:** Finally, financial management is critical, as it is often cited as a major challenge to the effectiveness of CSO networks. More successful CSO networks tend to develop collaborative relationships with donors, openly share among members information about receipt/allocation of financial resources, and transparently compensate individual member CSOs that incur special costs in promoting the work of the network as a whole.

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Case Studies

CSO networks can be formed to achieve a wide variety of objectives, from improving HIV/AIDS service delivery, to safely engaging in advocacy work, to supporting peace negotiations, to promoting water resource strategies, to fighting government corruption. The following are case studies of two successful CSO networking experiences:

The South African Civil Society Water Caucus (SAWC)

The *2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD)* drew South African CSOs together around development and environmental sustainability priorities. Summit meetings and discussions led to the creation and formalization of the South African Civil Society Water Caucus (SAWC), a network of about 20 organizations responsible for hosting and providing leadership on WSSD water-issue debates.

After its creation, SAWC quickly became a model for successful constituency expansion through effective partnerships. Within one year, it had 50 CSO members and was recognized by the South African government and the public as a critical voice engaging in water policy and implementation processes. It influenced a new global policy on large dams, regularly advised the South African Parliament’s Committee for Water and Forestry and forged mechanisms for dialogue with the government on the most controversial water sector issues.²

Sri Lanka: Networks for Community Development and Peacebuilding

Under the USAID-funded Sri Lanka Peace Support Project, a network of 64 community-based organizations called People's Forums was created. These Forums were diverse and representative, with members' ethnicities, religions, genders, ages and occupations reflecting each community. They focused on concrete results through action plans responding to locally-identified needs for projects implemented by community members (e.g., creating new economic opportunities, building better schools and hospitals or bringing together communities divided by decades of ethnic conflict).

While the 64 Forums were spread geographically throughout Sri Lanka, seven regional networks (containing 8-10 Forums each) were formed to plan cooperative actions among neighboring Forums. In addition, a nationwide Federation, composed of all 64 Forums, was formed to provide training and plan concerted advocacy campaigns. The People's Forums Initiative achieved successes in diverse areas of community development and peacebuilding: 15,400 received applied training in democratic participation and decision-making; hundreds of families were assisted in starting new businesses following the December 2006 tsunami; thousands of Sri Lankans were taught the languages of their neighbors; and thousands more received training on violence prevention, peacebuilding, consensus politics and tolerance.

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Looking Ahead: Networking Considerations for the Future

In an era where improved information/communications technologies (ICT) are increasingly utilized to strengthen networking, USAID and other donors are engaging with questions about the best

uses of social networking tools and mobile technology, etc.). A separate *Tips [NUMBER XX]* paper explores the opportunities and challenges of using technology to enhance networking.

Resources that Offer Detailed Guidance for CSO Networks and Networking

- *Supporting Civil Society Networks in International Development Programs.* Dr. Darcy Ashman with Chanya Charles, Ana Maria Cuenca, Carmen Luca, Barney Singer, and Marty Schmith. Academy for Educational Development. December 2005. Primary resource for this *NGO Tips* paper. Available at <http://www.aed-ccsg.org/resources/reports.html>. Accessed July 2009.
- *NGOConnect* Web site (an example of a CSO networking tool with resources on networking and other topics of interest to CSOs). Available at <http://www.ngoconnect.net>. Accessed July 2009.
- *HIV/AIDS Networking Guide: A comprehensive resource for individuals and organizations who wish to build, strengthen, or sustain a network.* International Council of AIDS Service Organizations. 2002. Available at <http://www.icaso.org/guidelines.html>. Accessed April 2009.
- *Building National Campaigns: Activists, Alliances, and How Change Happens.* Oxfam. 2007. Available at <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/nationalcampaigns/index.html>. Accessed July 2009.

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- *Measuring the Immeasurable: Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation of Networks*. Edited by Marilee Karl. Novib. 1999. Available at www.novib.nl (book excerpt). Accessed July 2009.

References

- ¹ *Supporting Civil Society Networks in International Development Programs* (Washington, D.C.: Academy for Educational Development, 2005), pp. 11-14. May 5, 09.
- ² Environmental Monitoring Group, available at http://www.emg.org.za/networks/water_caucus.htm, and U.S. Agency for International Development, available at <http://africastories.usaid.gov>. Accessed July 2009.

NGOTips

For more information:

This NGO Tips brief is available online at www.NGOConnect.NET. This dynamic and interactive site is dedicated to connecting and strengthening non-governmental organizations (NGOs), networks, and support organizations worldwide.

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