NGOTips
A Legacy of Strong NGOs and Networks

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 networks' 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.

> " 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

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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]

- *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.

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