

**Partnerships between Governments and Civil Society
for Service Delivery in Less Developed Countries:
Cause for Concern**

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Partnerships between Governments and Civil Society for Service Delivery in Less Developed Countries: Cause for Concern

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This short paper raises a number of concerns about partnerships for service delivery between governments and civil society organisations (CSOs) in less developed countries (LDCs). The CSOs in question are not-for-profit voluntary associations -- usually but not only large non-governmental organisations. Private sector firms are deemed here to stand outside civil society.¹ There is an enormous number of such CSOs – one analyst of Africa has written of “an explosion of service-oriented NGOs” in response to emerging opportunities for partnerships.²

This paper does *not* argue that such partnerships are all bad. The involvement of CSOs in service delivery often enhances efficiency and probity. It sometimes enables ordinary people – individually and collectively -- to influence the implementation and (less often) the content of policies and projects. It often strengthens those CSOs that become partners. Some partnerships even grow out of decisions by governments to adopt self-provisioning models developed within civil society. One rather hopeful study identified potential gains from that kind of partnership – and even from partnerships that are not based on CSO models.

...collective action through self-provisioning may contribute to their [CSOs'] broader engagement in the public sphere. Efforts to provide services, then, can become transformed into organised struggles of the otherwise excluded and provide a platform not only for articulating rights, but also for recasting responsibilities and obligations.³

¹ The definition of ‘civil society’ used here is as follows: an intermediate realm situated between state and household, populated by groups or associations that are separate from the state, enjoy some autonomy in relation to the state, and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests, identities or values. Note that this definition does not presume that civil society is always virtuous or indeed ‘civil’. This facilitates objective analyses of civil society.

Associations of private sector firms are included within civil society as defined here, but individual firms are not.

² Y.Bangura, “New Directions in State Reform: Implications for Civil Society in Africa” in B.Beckman, E. Hansson and A Sjogren (eds.) *Civil Society and Authoritarianism in the Third World* (PODSU, Stockholm, 2001) p. 257.

³ A.Cornwall and J. Gaventa, *From Users and Choosers to Makers and Shapers: Repositioning Participation in Civil Society*, IDS Working Paper 127 (Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, 2001) p. 15.

There is no denying that all of these things occur at times. But the evidence on which the present paper is based – most especially interviews with civil society specialists at the World Bank and other international development agencies, and with civil society activists from several LDCs – indicates that some of these gains are rather unusual. That evidence further suggests that in some (perhaps many) LDCs, the totality of gains from such partnerships is matched or even outweighed by substantial negative implications – for civil society and for its capacity to assist the poor. This paper briefly examines these.

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Partnerships for service delivery between CSOs and governments have clearly yielded many positive results in *industrialised* countries. This is apparent from the admirable work of the Johns Hopkins University project on the ‘third (that is, non-profit) sector.’ It is a theme that they stress.

However, serious difficulties arise when this argument is extended to LDCs. The Hopkins team tends to make that extension. And yet despite their enthusiasm for partnerships, even they acknowledge some of the problems set out below – although much of their enthusiasm has survived.

Conditions are less favourable in most LDCs than in the North – on several fronts. Civil society there is almost always less (often far less) strong than in the North. When large numbers of people suffer from social exclusion, low literacy, poor health, serious poverty, etc., it is more difficult to organise and galvanise them than in more prosperous societies. Amid conditions of scarcity, it is harder for CSOs to survive without financial support from donors and/or governments than in the North where donations from individuals are more easily obtainable. It is more unusual in LDCs than in industrialised democracies to find CSOs that feel confident enough to challenge government actors on technologically or technocratically complex issues – or indeed on any issues.

There are also problems on the government side. Many LDC governments feel too insecure to accept criticism and dissent from CSOs with which they have formed partnerships for service delivery – as prevailing norms often require Northern governments to do. Many governments in the South have treated CSOs with hostility, suspicion or indifference without facing the kind of punitive political reactions from important interests that are common in the North where liberal norms are usually more solidly established. Policy design in industrialised democracies is usually more open to public scrutiny and to inputs from civil society than in LDCs. It is also more institutionalised – so that capricious and dismissive actions by officials, and the abuse of such processes by politicians, bureaucrats and powerful interest groups is less common. The same is broadly true of policy implementation. Utterly or

substantially phoney government ‘consultations’ and ‘partnerships’ with CSOs are much easier to bring off (and are more common) in LDCs.

We should therefore be cautious about expecting partnerships for service delivery between CSOs and governments in LDCs to be anything like as successful as they have been in industrialised countries.

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There are four main doubts about the utility of government/CSO partnerships for service delivery in LDCs.

- ◆ They sow divisions among (and, to a degree, within) CSOs. The main division that arises is between those that are selected as partners and those that are excluded, although there is more to it than that. This often does serious damage because in most LDCs, civil society is less than formidable. Its already limited capacity to operate as an effective force for improved governance, development and poverty reduction is thereby undermined.
- ◆ Such partnerships often provide CSOs with little or no discretion over the implementation of service delivery. As a result, they cannot make the kind of constructive adjustments which take into account distinctive local conditions and local preferences -- of which they are capable and which improve service delivery, not least for the poor.
- ◆ The inadequate empowerment of CSOs also means that they cannot make much impact upon widespread corruption among low-level government employees which afflicts service delivery in many LDCs.
- ◆ Such partnerships often coopt those CSOs that are drawn into them. This undermines their inclination and capacity to pursue other activities that are vitally important – to development in general and, more specifically, to improved governance and to poverty reduction. Those activities include advocacy work, and efforts to mobilize, organise, network and empower poorer groups.

Let us now examine these points in a little more detail.

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Dividing Civil Society

Some World Bank civil society specialists and CSO activists in LDCs have become concerned over the divisive impact on civil society of decisions to

draw some CSOs into partnerships for service delivery. Divisions tend to arise both between and within CSOs, although the former problem is much more serious than the latter. Five different types of divisions should be noted.

First, LDC governments usually form partnerships with large, formally organised NGOs. This inevitably entails the exclusion of other large NGOs that are oriented towards service delivery. That tends to create divisions between large NGOs that are selected and those that are not. Some LDC governments recognise that this can happen, and set out to achieve it in order to divide and rule. But even when that is not their intention, the problem may arise.

Second, by concentrating on large NGOs, governments also exclude smaller, more informal and sometimes ‘indigenous’ CSOs, often at the local level.⁴ Many larger NGOs claim to have solid ties to smaller, regional or local CSOs. Where that claim is justified, divisions along these lines are less serious. In a small number of cases – India, Brazil and the Philippines for example – these claims are valid.⁵ But in the great majority of LDCs, they are wholly or largely invalid.⁶

Third, since partnerships are often formed for the delivery of services within *single* sectors – education, health, natural resource management, etc. -- estrangements and unfriendly rivalries often arise between CSOs which, in response, develop sector specialisations. This tends to promote fragmentation among CSOs along sector lines, and to prevent them from bringing their strengths to bear in multiple sectors. The coordination of CSO (and even of government) initiatives across sectors is thus undermined.⁷ It therefore becomes easier for government actors to deal unfairly with CSOs that are isolated in single sectors. This can also foster damaging conflicts *within* individual CSOs which prefer to operate in multiple sectors but which are compelled by the availability of opportunities for partnerships with government in single sectors to stress just one element of their agendas.

Fourth, partnerships for service delivery tend to catalyse suspicion and conflict *between* CSOs which mainly engage in service delivery and those which stress other activities. CSOs that are preoccupied with the deepening of political reforms and with action to empower people at the grassroots usually

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵ This comment is based on my work with PRIA (Participatory Research in Asia) in India, on exchanges with Gary Hawes on the Philippines, and on discussions with World Bank officials on Brazil.

⁶ It should be said that development practitioners differ somewhat on this issue. Those who work in multi-lateral and bi-lateral development agencies tend to be more pessimistic on this subject. Those who work in non-official development agencies – not least the Ford Foundation – tend to be more optimistic. But there is still broad consistency in the views that they express.

⁷ This is discussed in more detail in J.Manor, “User Committees: A Potentially Damaging Second Wave of Decentralization”, forthcoming.

stress advocacy work and efforts to enhance the capacity of local groups to assert themselves, and to organise and network local associations. They tend (correctly – see the section on cooptation below) to the view that partnerships for service delivery usually undermine the ability of those CSOs which become partners to perform these other tasks.⁸ They often suspect that CSOs which enter such partnerships are little more than entrepreneurial responses to the financial rewards that these arrangements offer – a suspicion which some World Bank analysts share.⁹

Fifth, conflicts *within* CSOs – over whether to stress service delivery over other activities – also arise. The same issues set out in the preceding paragraph create dissension within CSOs that see utility both in service delivery and in advocacy and empowerment work.

Divisions within civil society are especially worrying in two types of situations. Second, in countries where service delivery has long been the main preoccupation of CSOs,¹⁰ opportunities for partnerships increase their already inordinate concentration on this activity. This undercuts the capacity of CSOs in such countries to achieve goals that the draft outline for the WDR supports: “coordinating voice” from the bottom up, and enabling citizens’ groups to develop “organizational capacity and leadership to overcome coordination and collective action problems and to leverage information”.¹¹

Second, in countries where CSOs are extremely short of funds (often because conditions of extreme scarcity make it difficult for them to obtain contributions), competitions to become partners in service delivery can become something akin to struggles for financial survival. The resentments of those that are excluded can be very bitter – towards governments and towards CSOs that are included.

To bemoan divisions among CSOs is not to suggest that seamless unity is either achievable or desirable within civil society. There will inevitably be – and ought to be -- a good deal of heterogeneity within civil society in any LDC. CSOs operate at different levels, at single or multiple levels, in urban or rural areas (or both), and in different (or in all) parts of a country. They have different goals, and seek to perform different functions and to organise or to represent different social groups. They fall into various organisational types and their modes of operation vary. Their relationships with governments in general and with specific official actors also, inevitably, vary. A certain amount of conflict between these diverse organisations is also inevitable – and to a degree, healthy. But in most LDCs, civil society is sufficiently nascent and weak – especially in relation to government – that it will suffer significant

⁸ See for example, Bangura, “New Dimensions in...”, p. 262.

⁹ Interview with a senior civil society specialist at the World Bank, 26 April 2002.

¹⁰ Uganda is an example.

¹¹ Draft of the WDR Outline, 24 September 2002, p. 22.

damage if serious suspicions, jealousies and conflicts are triggered between (and at times, within) elements of it.

The Failure to Empower CSOs

This section addresses the second and third bullet points above. CSOs that become partners of governments and then find that they cannot influence the content or implementation of services sometimes have to absorb most of the discontent that arises among people at the grassroots over the failure to adapt service delivery to distinctive local conditions. They may try to explain to people that their exasperation should instead be directed towards the government which has prevented them from influencing the process. But they often still end up shouldering much of the blame.

If they are also required to play a role in levying fees for services, they and not the government may once again be the main target of whatever popular resentment at fees may arise.

If – as is usually the case – their lack of powers renders them unable to discipline or pressure low-level bureaucrats, they often face another kind of popular discontent. Those bureaucrats usually have a history of petty corruption – selling favours or making preferential deals with cronies in local arenas. Such malfeasance is a major source of anger among ordinary folk. When CSOs have no leverage to curtail these activities, local residents may scorn them as hapless pawns in an unsavoury game – or worse, as accomplices.

There is a way to mitigate this problem (and some of the others noted above). When partnerships for service delivery are formed between CSOs and elected councils at lower levels which possess substantial funds and powers, the councils can usually be relied upon to tackle corrupt bureaucrats at lower levels. But since it is highly unusual for such councils to possess significant powers and funds, this exception does not arise very often in LDCs.

When one or more of the problems noted in this section occur, CSOs' credibility with ordinary people is usually damaged. This strikes at the heart of the aims of the World Bank's Comprehensive Development Framework and its recent emphasis on Community Driven Development.

The Cooptation of CSOs

Governments that draw CSOs into partnerships for service delivery, often set out to coopt them. They use the link and the advantages that accrue to CSOs to prevent them from taking up postures and activities that are inconvenient to the government. Even when governments do not actively seek to achieve this, many CSOs which enter partnerships feel that such activities

might put the partnership at risk and thus restrain themselves. This happens less often in industrialised countries, but in LDCs CSOs have less substance and fewer resources, and relations with governments are often more troubled. It is a common problem there – common enough to give many civil society specialists in international agencies and civil society activists pause.

Academic social scientists have also noted this problem. A careful study of relations between civil society and government in Uganda, had this to say about invitations by the government for CSOs to participate in (*inter alia*) service delivery.

...when invited spaces are opened up in response to civil society pressure, the “participation by invitation” model excludes the many who are not invited; and also enables government to select those likely to endorse its own line, and to rein in ‘loose cannons’ and mute dissenting voices by incorporating them.¹²

Thwarting Some LDC Governments’ Good Intentions

Many governments in LDCs *set out* to sow the divisions within civil society and to coopt CSOs, but many others do not. And yet even where the latter is true, some or all of the problems noted in the bullet points above tend to arise anyway. The good intentions of high-level leaders are thwarted.

When this occurs, the explanation is often found in one or both of two processes. First, government employees (and sometimes politicians) at lower levels sabotage the efforts of those higher up in the system. They recognise that partnerships with CSOs that empower the latter will dilute their traditional dominance over development activities and lower-level power structures. They also see that this will undermine their capacity to make illicit profits from the sale of influence. They therefore seek to withhold powers that their superiors wish to extend to CSOs, and operate in ways that divide CSOs and coopt some.

Second, even when government employees (and sometimes politicians) at lower levels seek to develop genuine partnerships, they often *unwittingly* fail to conduct themselves in ways that achieve that purpose. After a lifetime of issuing orders, being authoritative, and acquiring what Indian civil servants call “the habit of command”, it is very difficult for them to become good listeners and open-hearted accommodators. They often hold meetings in their well-appointed offices – settings that intimidate ordinary people (and even some CSO activists) who are drawn into partnerships. They tend to conduct meetings along conventional lines. The minutes of previous meetings are gone

¹² K. Brock, R. McGee, and R. Ssewakiryanga, *Poverty Knowledge and Policy Processes: A case study of Ugandan national poverty reduction policy*, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, June 2002, pp. 43-44.

through and agreed, and then agendas (which government actors have often largely set) are waded through. The concerns of partners may only be raised at the end of long discussions under ‘any other business’, by which time partners feel still more intimidated and marginalised.¹³ These problems may sound trivial, but they can do significant damage.

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In recent years, the World Bank has made the inclusion of civil society as a meaningful actor in the design and implementation of development initiatives, and the strengthening of civil society more generally, major themes in its work. This is vividly apparent both in the Comprehensive Development Framework and in the more recent emphasis that it has given to Community Driven Development. Partnerships between LDC governments and CSOs have a role to play here. But such partnerships are fraught with numerous difficulties that need to be closely watched. Improvements in service delivery often occur when such partnerships are forged. But partnerships may simultaneously undermine the Bank’s other aim, to strengthen civil society.

¹³ I am grateful to Karen Brock and Rosemary McGee for calling this to my attention.