

***Rethinking Civil
Society and Support
for Democracy***
by Richard Youngs

A response

Rachel Hayman*

27 April 2015

Rethinking Civil Society and Support for Democracy:

A response from INTRAC, April 2015

In April 2015, the [Expertgruppen för Biståndsanalys](#) (EBA) produced a report by Richard Youngs entitled '[Rethinking Civil Society and Support for Democracy](#)'. INTRAC, as an international organisation dedicated to supporting civil society in international development, was invited to comment on the report at a seminar on 22nd April 2015.

The following note reproduces the comments made by INTRAC at the seminar. It aims to assist the Swedish government and Swedish civil society organisations in taking forward the report's recommendations. This paper firstly reflects on some aspects of the core content, then focuses on the five policy recommendations made in the report. It should be read in conjunction with the original report.

Reflections on the report

The report provides a very welcome contribution to analyses of the changing face of global civil society in relation to international support for democracy through and with civil society. It assesses different perspectives on how new the 'new' civil society movements and activities are, and captures the dilemmas of democracy support in this changing context. The author adopts a macro-level analysis, as requested by the study's commissioners, and covers a vast terrain of different actors and contexts. Inevitably there are limitations to this approach. Coverage of a broader range of civil society actors that impact on democracy would be welcome, such as the traditional media, trade unions, private foundations and think-tanks. The report could also engage more with the wide grey literature on civil society, democracy and governance, for example materials from CIVICUS or the Africa Power and Politics Programme.

The report resonates with INTRAC's work with INGOs, civil society departments, the civil society support sector in different parts of the world, and national-level CSOs; issues that we have explored in a number of studies, events and evaluations.¹

A 'crisis' of legitimacy and identity?

The changing civil society environment is leading INGOs to adjust not only to the challenges of closing spaces to operate and financial constraints, but also to a broadened concept of civil society in international development. For a long time there has been dominance of a donor-INGO-local partner (often professional NGO) nexus. This is changing, as a wider range of actors become more visible in international cooperation. INGOs are wondering whether and how to work with some of the newer, looser social movements, but also other actors, such trade unions, the private sector, or likeminded associations.

Many INGOs appear to be experiencing a 'crisis' of legitimacy and identity. They are facing criticism at home and overseas, and find themselves having to articulate their future roles and their added value. We find NGOs describing themselves increasingly as civil society organisations rather than NGOs. Some are redefining themselves as associations, movements,

¹ See <http://www.intrac.org/pages/en/civil-society-in-transition.html> for a range of materials on Civil Society in Transition

even social enterprises; others are foreseeing a completely different future where they will no longer exist in the global north in the same way.

On the other hand, as the report says we should not overstate the case. NGOs are a cornerstone of international cooperation and action at local, national and international levels, advocating on behalf of the marginalised and vulnerable. Over time NGOs have often been at the forefront of citizen activism and global movements.

Expanding the view on shrinking space

The report emphasises the impact of legal restrictions and shrinking space for civil society. At INTRAC we are also concerned about the less visible but problematic impact on democracy and civil society of shifts in funding and roles. In emerging economies and middle income countries, where aid is reducing and CSOs are beginning to work more closely with governments or seek funding through private channels, CSOs working on human rights and critical advocacy are finding it harder to fund their work. This may have lasting impacts on democratic space and development in these places.

Grey spaces between service-delivery and democracy work

By focusing on democracy-related civil society, and two main conceptualisations of these roles (liberal and republican), the analysis risks bypassing the function many NGOs play in creating “the social basis for democracy”,² the environment for citizens to gain voice, be active and take responsibility, hold those with power to account and to tackle social exclusion. This often includes organisations that mix service-delivery and advocacy functions. By meeting people where they are at, engaging with their daily concerns, supporting them to advocate for change, there is an implicit (and sometimes explicit) aim that democratic activity may be built from the grassroots up. At the same time, we need to be careful that broader social development work is not undermined by trying to make such activity work for a democracy agenda.

The report touches on these issues to some extent, but it often leans towards dichotomizing service-delivery and political roles; in reality much of what CSOs do is messy and interwoven.

Blurred lines between ‘Politics’ and ‘politics’

The above point reflects the conundrum for civil society analysts and activists of where civil society stops and Politics begin. This conundrum has always been there, but it underpins the restrictions placed on space for civil society in so many contexts. In many places the only avenue for political opposition lies in civil society activism, resulting in crack-downs by incumbent regimes or even by the new regimes brought in by civic action. In reality there are grey areas between the civil society and political spheres (just as there are between civil society and the private sector). However, in calling for more support for political parties and for channelling popular protest movements towards political party organisation or representative institutions, the report risks blurring big ‘P’ politics (the attempts of groups, primarily political parties, to gain control of the state through political processes) from little ‘p’ politics (the constant negotiations between groups over priorities, resources, policies, etc.) which are a central feature of the daily work of many CSOs.³

² This issue is explored in Beauclerk, Pratt and Judge (2011) [Civil Society in Action: Global case studies in a practice-based framework](#). This book emerged from a conference held in 2008 (funded by Sida amongst others) that sought to reignite discussions about the role of civil society – and not just NGOs - in international development and poverty alleviation.

³ Beauclerk, Pratt and Judge (2011)

A response to the recommendations

The report provides five recommendations for policy-makers, deliberately set out as broad guiding ideas rather than micro-level proposals. Again there is a lot of resonance with areas that are of concern to INTRAC. There is a strong desire amongst many donors and INGOs to engage with social movements and new civil society dynamics, but the widely-asked questions are 'how' and 'what' the practical (project-level) options and solutions might be.

Recommendation 1: new actors and bridge-building actors

INTRAC welcomes the idea of 'pushing out from the middle', towards more 'liberal' actors on the one hand and more 'republican' actors on the other. Donors need to find ways to reach beyond the 'usual suspects', and flexible funding and specific innovation funds would be valuable in this respect. Each entails risks, however. With regard to the more liberal actors, the major question is who decides what a 'good' or legitimate or democratic protest movement is, and do donors risk privileging certain perspectives that reflect an external viewpoint over others that may be more legitimate locally?

Whichever direction they push out towards, donors need to have deep knowledge of the relevant contexts in order to identify and engage with new actors, to assess the political and financial risks, and to understand the risks for the civil society actors involved. Where donors do not have a presence on the ground, they should work with trusted intermediaries or with other donors.

We need to be wary of steering civil society towards greater connections with political parties, which veers towards Big P politics. However, civil society should be encouraged to lobby and dialogue with politicians and political parties as a means to influencing policy and building support for civil society.

As the report suggests, donors do have a role to play in pushing for a favourable environment for civil society. This requires governments to value the roles and functions of civil society, and one way to encourage this is by developing a more international vision of civil society (see under Recommendation 2).

Recommendation 2: new actors / new models?

We endorse the report's view that civil society support programmes should include more reflection, learning and research space to explore conceptualisations of civil society, and civil society relative to political participation and roles. This is also vital for establishing the added value and future roles of northern-based and international NGOs, including how they might work with more fluid social movements. To this end we would propose the following:

- At the global level - global dialogues, including non-western thinkers and governments on civil society, democracy and rights. We need to encourage a more global perspective on the value of civil society to creating inclusive societies, particularly at a time when economic growth and security are becoming more prominent in development discourse once again. We need a concept of civil society that is defined and 'owned' by those who can counter the charge of western thought imperialism. This also relates to Recommendation 5 in the report.
- At the country level - dialogues and research on:
 - the structure of civil society (old actors, new actors, their legitimacy and sustainability, constraints and opportunities);

- relationships between political space, civic action, local government and private actors.

Donors should build on examples of successful bridge-building between civil society and local authorities that offer ways of building relationships of trust from the bottom up, and can reach a wider range of civil society actors. Multi-donor funds for civil society programmes are one funding mechanism that can facilitate this. They need to take a long-term and demand-driven approach, however, in order to nurture a sustainable and legitimate civil society.

Recommendation 3: re-opening closing spaces

This is where the real dilemmas emerge: should civil society support be depoliticized or politicized; should donors be overtly partisan or non-partisan; should they have an in-country presence or not? There are risks in ‘wrapping up’ democracy agendas within civil society support programmes. These are a very valid channel for building up grassroots empowerment, bridge-building and citizen activism; however, civil society support is about more than influencing political outcomes and such programmes may not lead to liberal democratic outcomes. A ‘democracy by stealth’ agenda may have negative impacts on the most vulnerable civil society actors, particularly if donors remain outside the country and work through intermediaries that bear both the financial and political risks.

We would endorse the recommendations in the report around:

- The call for more innovative and flexible funding. Many funding windows for civil society do not lend themselves to reaching out to newer actors or more risky activities because of accountability and reporting requirements, and the drive for demonstrable results.
- Greater coherence between donor ministries, including international trade.
- Greater coordination amongst donors about who is funding what in the sphere of civil society support so that complementarities and gaps can be identified.
- Greater reflection on and support for sustainability.⁴

The report reviews several funding instruments for civil society work on democracy. There is certainly value in maintaining different windows from foreign ministries/embassies and development cooperation departments. In our experience the former tend to offer smaller grants and potentially afford greater flexibility for more politically-oriented work. However, given that CSOs often incorporate governance or democracy-related issues as part of larger projects, and that they receive resources from a range of government and private funding sources, we need to examine how more general development cooperation funding can work better for supporting civil society in areas related to democracy.

Recommendation 4: support for information communications technology

In the debate around new forms of civic engagement, there is a lot of emphasis placed on the role of ICTs. Three reflections on the report in this regard are:

- Many of the new movements do not reach the poorest and the most marginalised. There are various reasons for this, but access to ICTs may be one of them. We need to understand better who is included and who is excluded.
- The report does not engage much with the traditional media, which are a very powerful actor in both promoting and closing civil society space.

⁴ Civil society sustainability is a focus area for INTRAC: <http://www.intrac.org/pages/en/civil-society-sustainability.html>

- More could be done to expand the use of ICTs for exchanging best practice and delivering high quality capacity building support.

Recommendation 5: linking civil societies, beyond protest

We are strongly in favour of facilitating networking and coordination amongst different groups of civil society actors. However, the recommendation of bringing protest movements together, including to reduce fragmentation and channel their energies towards representative institutions, needs to be considered very carefully. As the report highlights, social movements cover a vast range of interests, often competing. Who do donors favour and who do they exclude? Donors need to avoid favouring particular movements that correspond with a particular worldview. Working more with non-western donors (as proposed also under Recommendation 2) is extremely important in this respect. Donors also need to avoid pushing for unnatural alliances amongst movements. Where there may be potential is in facilitating stronger links between common interest groups across borders, including professional bodies.

Donors need to beware of encouraging a trajectory towards the formalisation of movements into organisations. This may require more creative support, including the provision of locally-relevant and accessible capacity building that can help to develop sustainable and legitimate local actors and actions. Donors could also support spaces for learning and sharing amongst active citizens, i.e. supporting *organising* not just organisations.

Finally, we would reiterate that the development of a civil society that is sustainable and legitimate in its own context is a long-term and hard process that needs to be able to withstand the ever-shifting political and economic environment.

**Dr Rachel Hayman is Head of Research at INTRAC: rhayman@intrac.org*