

Civil society contributions to development cooperation

It is often argued that the influence of civil society is hard to estimate. Yet, in development cooperation, the role of civil society actors such as grassroots organisations and lobby groups is becoming increasingly important. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are encouraged by donors to engage in policy-making processes and the monitoring of public reforms in developing economies. CSOs must also demonstrate results, reflecting the principles of the Paris Agenda and the Millennium Development Goals. A recent SADEV report demonstrates how CSOs contribute to the democratic development and what results that can be achieved. The evaluation shows that intangible CSO outcomes can be measured with the use of indicators (both quantitative and qualitative) developed collaboratively by donors and partners, and by continued donor support to the development of evaluation capacities within CSOs.

Civil Society Organisations...

'...have become a force which the government has started taking into consideration.'

'...create new alternatives, change quality of life of the citizens, convince state institutions to change and improve legislation, politics, the quality of services...'

'...often appear in the role of mediators or "connecting bridges" between public institutions and the population.'

SADEV CSO survey 2007

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are often strategic partners in development cooperation as a result of their relevant key competencies, such as local knowledge and experience in effectively lobbying for human rights. But in what specific ways does civil society contribute to development goals? What results may be expected?

CIVIL SOCIETY RESULTS IN MOLDOVA 2005-2007

Moldovan civil society is relatively young. CSOs only appeared in Moldova after the fall of the Soviet regime in 1991. However, during the 1990s thousands of donor-funded CSOs sprang up. Many of these CSOs commenced merely as private employment vehicles. But in time, CSO coalitions began developing into effective lobbying

groups. Today, CSOs are increasingly involved in public policy-making processes. However public-civil society partnerships are still new, and typically fragile. A large proportion of CSOs also lack necessary capacities, particularly advocacy skills. Nonetheless, civil society influence upon public reforms remains critical to the attainment of Moldovan development goals, especially in the context of European integration.

During the period 2005-2007, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) has funded Moldovan civil society programmes of the Eurasian Foundation (EF), the Soros Foundation (Soros) and the Swedish Helsinki Committee (SHC).

Through these programmes, 46 Moldovan CSOs have been working to enhance democratic development, such as media freedom, anti-discrimination, anti-corruption, free and fair elections and conformity of Moldovan legislation with international human rights standards. A recent SADEV report (see below) – based on interviews with Moldovan CSOs and public actors, discussions with donors and international organisations, and a CSO survey – identifies the various effects of these programmes. The report concludes that these programmes have precipitated significant change within Moldovan society, both in terms of the scope of their effects and in tangible outcomes. The results have been particularly significant in light of the relatively recent establishment of the programmes, and the restrictive context of the society within which they have operated (such as limited access to information).

Quantitative results

Contributions to democratic practices and principles

- Amendments to the 2004 election code, ensuring democratic procedures.
- Charter mandating transparency and non-bias during election campaigns.
- Election committees constituted according to democratic norms.
- Memorandum enhancing Parliament/Government-CSO collaboration.
- Draft transparency law.
- New school subject promoting democracy and human rights (D/HR) and knowledge about legislation.
- Expansion of local and independent media networks.
- Anti-corruption examination incorporated into legislative procedures.

Contributions to strengthened HR and non-discrimination

- Legislation against violence in the family.
- Four homes for children in difficulty financed by Chisinau City Hall.
- Secondary laws protecting prisoners' human rights.
- Prisoners' complaints committee.
- Social reintegration programmes for prisoners.
- Legislation and codes of conduct in prisons aligned to HR standards.
- Nine community centres providing assistance for vulnerable groups.
- Publicly financed public-CSO partnerships to assist people with mental, social and physical problems.
- Legislation protecting the rights of disabled people.
- Draft anti-discrimination law protecting a wider range of minorities.
- Ministry of Social Protection established.
- Gender equality law instituted.
- Public funding provided to small farms.

Qualitative results

Contributions to democratic practices and principles

- Understanding among public officials of the importance of integrating D/HR principles in reforms and new laws; public actors seeking CSO input.
- Attention brought to bear on corruption cases.
- Media at local and national levels disseminating unbiased information.

- Increased trust in the electoral process by citizens.
- Media increasingly reflecting the interests and views of wider sections of the population.
- A strengthened, more pluralistic, civil society.

Contributions to strengthened HR and non-discrimination

- Improvement in public servants' attitudes towards vulnerable groups.
- Public actors and the public demanding HR activities.

HOW TO STRENGTHEN CIVIL SOCIETY RESULTS

Notwithstanding these results, the situation of civil society in Moldova remains problematic. The results that have been achieved are largely attributable to improved lobbying and networking among smaller groups of professional CSOs. Still, most CSOs remain weak, due to their ongoing dependency on donor funding and their weak internal and external communication skills. Most lack even the most basic project management skills, particularly regarding results monitoring. External restrictions also inhibit the effectiveness of CSOs: limited access to public information, restrictions on media freedom and limited opportunities for civil society to influence agendas in meetings with public actors.

How CSOs may strengthen themselves

- Form coalitions, and include weaker CSOs and CSOs acting in difficult environments.
- Ensure regular data collection on results within all projects, using simple and clear procedures. The diffusion of CSO results will enhance the credibility and influence of CSOs in relation to decision-makers, the public and donors.

- Develop income-generating activities to decrease donor dependency.
- Improve communication strategies.

What to promote among public actors

- Create a more enabling environment for civil society; provide material resources and greater public space through freer access to information and a more independent media.
- Continued inclusion of civil society actors in dialogue; consult with CSOs at every stage (including prior to commencement of dialogue), share information and provide feedback.
- Procedures for public-civil society partnerships, including transparency and accountability mechanisms.

Recommendations to donors

- Encourage the formation of CSO coalitions, to enhance the transfer of capacities between CSOs.
- Work with CSO partners across various domains (not only within D/HR) to strengthen a wider spectrum of CSOs.
- Encourage public-civil society partnerships in the shaping, execution and monitoring of reforms, including implementation of legislation.
- Support basic capacity development within CSOs.
- Conduct risk analyses prior to implementing new development cooperation policies (new policies may adversely affect CSOs and their work).
- Enhance CSO self-sufficiency by promoting income-generating strategies that are independent from donor funding.
- Promote transparency and accountability mechanisms in public-CSO partnerships.

IMPROVING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT CIVIL SOCIETY RESULTS

The lack of available data about civil society results is a major obstacle to enhancing the efficiency of development cooperation. Monitoring systems must be improved to measure results against objectives, and to help reorient and improve strategies. Direct outputs of development activities (such as holding human rights seminars with public actors) must be linked to outcomes that reflect concrete changes in the appearance and behaviour of objects and actors; for example new legislation that strengthens human rights. Good results-monitoring is a prerequisite for improving knowledge about results, which in turn, is necessary for the critical task of reorienting strategies to enhance their efficiency.

How to improve results-monitoring

- Develop overall indicators at the programme level jointly with local CSOs.
- Encourage CSO partners to report results using both qualitative and quantitative project indicators, and aggregate these into programme indicators.

- Combine qualitative and quantitative indicators: Quantitative measures indicate the scope of achievements; qualitative indicators measure the quality and mechanisms leading to the results.
- Ensure data is collected regularly, through simple, cost-effective routines.
- Enhance evaluation capacities within CSOs.

Identifying outcomes, on a regular basis, is vital in all development cooperation. Monitoring CSO results is not only in the interests of donors, in order to ensure efficient use of resources. Perhaps even more importantly, monitoring CSO results improves civil society's understanding about how it contributes to development. Such knowledge can assist civil society to improve its performance, to communicate results better and to improve its image as a force for positive social change – in the eyes of decision-makers and citizens alike.

SOURCES AND FURTHER INFORMATION

This policy brief is based on: Karin Dawidson and Inger Wikström Öbrand (2007) *Assessing Civil Society Outcomes: The case of Moldovan CSOs supported by Sida*, SADEV Report 2007:2. This and other SADEV publications are available at www.sadev.se.