

IDS RESEARCH SUMMARY

Research findings at a glance from the
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Mark Robinson and Steven Friedman

Civil Society, Democratisation and Foreign Aid in Africa

How is civil society contributing to democratisation in Africa and what is the impact of foreign aid upon this process? This IDS Research Summary addresses these important questions by highlighting the conclusions of a comparative research project based on empirical case studies of 12 leading civil society organisations (CSOs) in South Africa and Uganda, and related material from Ghana. The study's implications and recommendations are far-reaching for both donors and CSOs. Examples of effective advocacy in specific contexts are given, but the findings also emphasise the limited overall influence of CSOs upon policy and they downplay the role of foreign aid.

Civil society: weaknesses and strengths

A major finding from the research is that few civil society organisations have achieved significant policy impact. Moreover, two of the three CSOs that have – the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the Ugandan Manufacturer's Association – are not dependent on donor funding. Both were able to influence policy and legislation in their respective spheres of interest due to specific features of their organisational structure and their specific relationship with their respective governments. Both mobilise the bulk of their operational expenses from membership subscriptions and draw very selectively on foreign aid, usually to finance specific projects. They also benefit from perceived legitimacy among government officials, either by virtue of historical factors or broad complementarity of objectives, which provides them with privileged access to the policy realm. Both organisations have established specialised policy departments that conduct analysis, undertake advocacy and lobbying work

and represent their views in consultative forums, all of which provide the capacity required for exercising influence. The Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA) has also registered success in its policy engagement with government, but for somewhat different reasons. It does not have a membership base and relies heavily on support from aid donors, but has a high degree of organisational capacity, which enables it to conduct well-conceived and effective policy interventions. In contrast, donor funded organisations in Ghana and Uganda have generally proved ineffective in their efforts to influence government policy and legislation.

Impact of donor aid

More generally, the research shows how a small number of urban-based intermediaries led by middle class elites command a disproportionate share of foreign aid resources. Many of these exert a limited influence on public policy and do not make an enduring contribution to democracy through their

activities. This is not to insist that donor funding for civil society advocacy has had no impact on democratisation at all – in some cases, as with initial support for COSATU or more general backing for the anti-apartheid movement, donors have had a beneficial impact. Positive impact seems to occur where they are able to strengthen existing democratising trends, whereas attempts to create them seem destined to fail. Moreover, resources do matter: The least effective organisations in terms of policy engagement The Ugandan National Student's Association and the National Organisation of Trade Unions in Uganda and the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) in South Africa are also the least well endowed financially.

Benefits of democratic Civil Society Organisations

Strong traditions of internal democracy, such as mass membership, are not essential pre-requisites of political efficacy, but they do ensure the leadership accountability and

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membership involvement which is essential if organisations are to perform the prime democratic function of giving citizens a voice. Close proximity to government can have contradictory effects. Where organisations seek to use it as a substitute for building independent capacity, it compromises both their capacity to speak for members and the ability to influence government policy priorities, as the cases of SANCO and Foundation of African Business and Consumer Services show. Where it becomes a resource used to pursue members' concerns, it can facilitate access and influence.

The study finds that the contribution of civil society organisations to democracy is not limited to their capacity to influence public policy. If assessed only on this criterion their impact would be judged to be very minimal. But the evidence suggests that their contribution to democracy also includes their ability to foster voice and participation, which in turn are functions of internal governance practices. Their capacity to offer citizens a say in decisions and to enhance pluralism may be as important at their ability to influence policy and demand accountability from state actors.

Policy implications

The analysis points to three critical factors required for successful policy engagement by CSOs:

- Strong organisational capacity
- A high degree of perceived political legitimacy and access to government officials
- Adequate financial resources, either from internal or external sources. Foreign aid is not the most critical determinant of successful engagement.

The findings suggest donors should:

- Ensure that groups in rural or urban low-income areas and those with a mass membership receive adequate support, thereby potentially increasing the diversity of perspectives.
- Increase their understanding of CSOs to identify participatory organisations and potentially effective organisations, or develop approaches that enable organisations to identify themselves as such. Donors could play a role in strengthening organisational capacity by replacing periodic grant support with long-term programme grants and technical assistance.
- Provide specialised assistance aimed at strengthening capacity for policy analysis and advocacy, especially for organisations lacking these skills. Donors can also help to create opportunities for structured policy dialogue with governments for a more representative set of membership-based organisations and grassroots coalitions, while also respecting civil society's right to engage in public advocacy.
- Adopt strategies designed to identify and institutionalise local sources of funding from membership dues, indigenous philanthropy and internally generated sources of income. This would reduce problems of financial dependence, reduced legitimacy and erosion of autonomy which arises from heavy reliance on foreign aid.
- Donors should seek to promote a more supportive policy environment for CSOs by encouraging governments to remove restrictive controls and simplify registration procedures. Such measures would contribute to increased organisational capacity with a view to building political efficacy for a wider and more representative range of CSOs, with positive implications for strengthening democracy through autonomous civic action.

Credits

This Research Summary was written by Ruth Mayne, Independent Consultant, and is based on a study by Mark Robinson, Head of Profession for Governance and Conflict, UK Department for International Development and Steven Friedman, Director, Centre for the Study of Democracy, Rhodes University, South Africa.

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