

THE FOUNDATION FOR  
DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

**Leveraging Civil  
Society Participation  
for Sustainable Water  
Outcomes**

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## LEVERAGING CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION FOR SUSTAINABLE H<sub>2</sub>O OUTCOMES

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Few would disagree with the session focus statement that public participation and support is a vital component of any integrated water management or coastal management plan - without it, no long-term actions will succeed or remain sustainable. But, despite widespread acknowledgement in policy statements and program design of the importance of public participation and support, the allocation of resources to engagement with civil society in learning partnerships and facilitation of community participation typically falls well short of desirable levels. Why is this so?

It reflects on the one hand, a lack of understanding among the stakeholders – including civil society - of the benefits of genuine engagement and participation and thus a lack of commitment. It also reflects an all too real appreciation of how difficult, even dangerous such processes can be when the different agendas at play are not well understood.

The benefits of effective community engagement range from “permission to operate” which can always be withdrawn to access to local knowledge and resources and shared responsibility for sustainable outcomes. The perceived disadvantages range from the sharing of power and control to the time-consuming, patience-wearing processes of multi-sector dialogue. To embark on such a process requires courage and typically external facilitation to create space for genuine interaction and the search for win-win or negotiation of otherwise acceptable outcomes.

### **Purpose then process – why involve civil society?**

Accelerated progress towards achievement of the Millennium Development Goals<sup>1</sup> requires public participation and support. Governmental and inter-governmental and private sector mechanisms are insufficient on their own or even together, given resource limitations. Lack of awareness or poor understanding or distrust of public and private sector agendas can lead to passive or active resistance and frustrate the necessary levels of local participation and ownership.

Integrated water resources management presents a complex set of issues requiring multi-sector, multi-stakeholder and multi-disciplinary partnerships at and between all levels, local, national, regional, global. In developed countries in particular, with highly developed market economies, there is inadequate understanding of “commons” or “public goods” thinking and a rather proprietorial approach to management of the resources at hand. Governments are elected and remain in power on the basis of their ability to satisfy the immediate needs of their constituents, not their inclusive and generous approaches to the plight of outsiders. Private sector partners are in the business of staying in business, delivering returns to shareholders. In both cases, decision making reflects short or at best medium-term time-frames. Consideration of inter-generational issues is frequently derailed by disputes over the available scientific information and a pre-disposition to discount warnings about future scenarios, side-stepping even the precautionary principle.

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<sup>1</sup> Goal 7 (Ensure environmental sustainability: Target 10: Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation (Indicators: 30. Proportion of population with sustainable access to an improved water source, urban and rural and 31. Proportion of population with access to improved sanitation

Public-private partnerships, while a step in the right direction in increasing the pool of resources and expertise, are also not sufficient to address the range and complexity of issues on behalf of citizens. Indeed, powerful alliances of public and private sector interests can sometimes overwhelm less well organised, less articulate, and less well resourced communities. The result is failure to capitalise on the financial and other resources available within the community, missing important local information in the process and undermining local ownership and sustainability. In the dominant scenario, short-term outputs are often valued more highly than long-term outcomes or good process.

Community based institutions underpin good governance; but, alienation and exhaustion quickly follow when communities find themselves consulted but not involved or shouldering much of the burden of effort for awareness raising and delivery and maintenance of services. At times, community participation is assumed on the basis of simplistic presumptions about volunteerism and community spirit, without understanding of the wealth of experience and knowledge which is available if time is taken to map civil society resources.

The civil society contribution is rarely given the necessary level of support, sometimes because the existing models for management of community resources are suspect. On one hand, civil society leaders receive little recognition and little if any remuneration. On the other hand, co-opted by reward mechanisms can compromise their ability to represent their communities. Having been "consulted", civil society representatives sometimes struggle to identify instances where community recommendations have been taken into account ahead of the interests of their more powerful public and private sector partners. The failure to influence can generate instability within civil society organisations, disrupting continuity and allowing their more powerful partners to "divide and rule", undermining the coherence of civil society positions.

### **Unpacking the jargon – what is civil society?**

Regardless of the objective – whether integrated water resources management, hilltops to oceans, or another development outcome – the degree to which we are able to access the additional resources available in what is referred to as "civil society" and leverage the effectiveness of multi-stakeholder partnerships through strengthened civil society involvement will be determined by our understanding of what "civil society" is and how it operates. Only with better understanding of the value of increased and more effective civil society engagement on the part of all of the stakeholders will it be possible to develop inclusive and integrating processes and mechanisms and ensure the appropriate levels of financial and other support.

The first barrier to greater understanding of the importance of civil society involvement is the language used by development theorists and practitioners around the world.

Civil Society comprises, according to *the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) in 1995*<sup>2</sup> ". . .the spheres of activity (*plural*) where community or common interest groups more effectively mobilise and manage resources than either the market or the government", by some definitions including small and large community organisations, environmental and cultural groups, sports associations, the trade union movement representing labour, religious movements, political movements, academic endeavour, with "media" seated uneasily between civil society, government and private sector depending on the context. Despite its many facets, civil society by this definition

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations Capital Development Fund publication - 1995

became one point of a triangle, with government and private sector engagement described as tri-sector partnerships.

An important advance on this rather mechanistic construction has been proposed by Alan Fowler, who describes civil society as “a complex, self-organising and adaptive system rather than one component of distinct divisions between institutional types within society”. He has proposed “a new conceptualisation of the work of international development agencies, revisiting basic assumptions, adopting an organic view of change and updating intervention analysis, methods and measures”.<sup>3</sup>

For the purposes of development cooperation, the work of Serrano and Van Rooy provides useful segmentation, underlining the positive “civic” aspects to the notion of civil (as opposed to uncivil?) society. According to Serrano (1994), civil society comprises “the groups, organisations and movements freely formed by citizens not for profit, but to advance group interests or the common good. . .the mediation. . .between private citizens on the one hand and state and corporate structures on the other. . .through which individuals express a sense of belonging and develop solidarity with others”.<sup>4</sup> According to Van Rooy (1998), it is the “values and norms, a collective noun, a space for action, an historical movement, anti-hegemony, an antidote to the state. . .both an observable reality (civil society as a collective of conflicting, interdependent, inter-influential organisations) and (warts and all) a good thing”<sup>5</sup>.

Is it any wonder that governments and businesses find it hard to engage?

As a phenomenon, “civil society” is closely related to the more widely understood notions of community participation and community engagement. In 1991, the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau (predecessor to the Australian Agency for International Development) described community participation as meaning “. . .the involvement of intended beneficiaries in the planning, design, implementation and subsequent maintenance” of projects and activities, with people mobilised to manage resources and contribute to decision making<sup>6</sup>. In more recent times, this rather “top-down”, seemingly paternalistic approach has been replaced by the concept of “community engagement” which “goes beyond consultation” and “is the result of open dialogues with communities, providing information, drawing on community knowledge and promoting the active participation of communities in policy-making processes”.<sup>7</sup>

Community participation, community engagement, civil society. . .all three reflect processes that derive from and contribute to “social capital”. . .the “glue” that cements human relationships, the “fuel” that galvanises action, the “oil” that greases the wheels and smooths troubled waters. According to Robert Putnam, “whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue” Putnam goes on to explain that “the

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<sup>3</sup> Fowler, A “Civil society and international development: towards a complex systems perspective and practice” Proceedings of the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference of the International NGO Training and Research Centre, December 2001, Oxford

<sup>4</sup> Serrano, Isagani R Civil Society in the Asia-Pacific Region Washington, DC: Civicus: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, 1994

<sup>5</sup> Alison van Rooy, Senior Researcher (Civil Society and Good Governance, North South Institute, Canada

<sup>6</sup> AIDAB 1991 Social analysis and community participation: guidelines and activity cycle checklist

<sup>7</sup> People Together Project 2000: The power of community. People Working Together Project and Victorian Local Governance Association, Melbourne

difference is that “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.”<sup>8</sup> Thus social capital enables to “act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives”<sup>9</sup>.

In 2000, Bornschieer goes a step further, linking social capital to economic progress, citing evidence from a sample of 33 countries that the presence of trust and tolerance is a reliable predictor for economic growth and important for the future economic competitiveness of a society<sup>10</sup>.

### **From rhetoric to reality**

But words are easy and the language of “development partnerships” has been degraded in many situations by an inadequate understanding of the nature and role of civil society and old-fashioned “transactional” approaches to community participation. . . community development as something done *to* an intended “beneficiary”, rather than *with* a desired partner. Only in relatively recent times has our intuitive understanding of the benefits of the process and the act of community engagement (beyond participation) been validated by evaluation and empirical measurement.

While more remains to be done in articulating the business case for “civil society engagement”, development cooperation initiatives are often framed nowadays in terms of multi-sector “partnerships” involving civil society. But many of these, led by the larger donor agencies and international organisations including the Multilateral Development Banks, present as public private partnerships with a community consultation component.

So why is civil society engagement so difficult?

Civil society is not a homogeneous structured “whole” – it is, almost by definition, fragmented, opportunistic, self-selecting and self-organising, with multiple, constantly changing alliances between more formal institutions (religious bodies, trade unions, academics, associations, media) and community based organisations or movements that depend on volunteer inputs. If this is so, who speaks for civil society? How are its representatives selected? To whom are they accountable? How clear is their mandate?

Too easily, civil society engagement and public participation become boxes to tick rather than long-term processes. Civil society is typically far from an equal partner in policy and decision making. In extreme cases, community engagement is “code” for transfer of responsibility in the interests of “smaller government” or image laundering on the part of corporations that have yet to be convinced that “corporate social responsibility” is good business.

### **Hilltops to Oceans**

In integrated water resources management – hilltops to oceans – multi-sector partnerships encounter profound difficulties, bridging vastly different contexts – upstream, downstream, coastal,

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<sup>8</sup> Putnam, R. D. (2000) *Bowling Alone. The collapse and revival of American community*, New York: Simon and Schuster.

<sup>9</sup> Putnam, R. D. (1995) ‘Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital’, *The Journal of Democracy*, 6:1, pps 65-78

<sup>10</sup> Bornschieer, V (2001) “Trust and Tolerance Enabling Social Capital Formation for Modern Economic Growth and Societal Change.” Paper presented at the APROS2000/ISA conference (Asia Pacific Researchers in Organization Studies together with the International Sociological Association), Sydney (Australia), Dec. 2000. On Internet: [www.bus.uts.edu.au/apros2000/Papers/Bornschieer.pdf](http://www.bus.uts.edu.au/apros2000/Papers/Bornschieer.pdf).

and beyond - different agendas and powerful vested interests, and different disciplines. Successful management of all of these dimensions requires the integration of social planning, education and awareness raising, as well as scientific and technical solutions. Resolution of water management issues also demands the management of tensions between time-frames, from the immediate, to medium-term and inter-generational perspectives. The articulation of a "public good" or "commons" approach is extremely important, but difficult to mount persuasively, especially when decisions making reflects not just local or even national, but global imperatives. If this is the case for developed countries, how much more challenging must it be for counterparts in developing countries, particularly for those facing serious water deficits and increasing population pressures.

### **The way forward**

So whose responsibility is it to increase or enhance the role of civil society? What can be done to raise support through information and education and to secure long-term commitment to and involvement in local, national and international projects?

Civil Society is typically less well resourced than public sector institutions or the private sector. It is therefore less able to articulate its case effectively. But when resources are lacking or volunteer effort is exhausted, how can support be provided without compromising civil society's very essence. . .its independence and non-governmental, not for profit, inclusive, community character. How can Governments or businesses help without inviting accusations that they are "buying" community support? Or engaging in "window dressing" or "image laundering"? What of public and private sector efforts to encourage self-help or self-reliance? Is there a risk that such actions represent an abdication of their "public" or "corporate" social responsibility?

On the other hand, who defines what is reasonable in terms of civil society's contribution to the costs of initiatives designed for their benefit. At what stage does civil society's involvement in policy and decision making require that citizens also share the risks? What should be the role of government or business when is community reticence a sign of apathy or evidence of other forms of dependency?

As development practitioners, local and international experience tells us that more effort is needed to persuade all stakeholders (including civil society) of the benefits of genuine multi-sector engagement – not on the basis of romantic or misguided understandings of community engagement, but on the basis of evidence of added value and an appreciation of the role of social capital as an essential non-economic source of economic (and other) progress. Re-invigoration of partnerships requires an improved understanding of civil society as a complex, self-organising and adaptive system of ever-changing alliances - sometimes warm and fuzzy, sometimes militant and adversarial, with its protagonists sometimes blissfully unaware or ignorant of the issues, at other times a source of valuable information and opinion.

Our experience also tells us that in dealing with diverse and unequal partners, independent, expert facilitation may be required to overcome long-standing prejudices and deconstruct caricatures. In addition, new processes and mechanisms may need to be developed to level the playing field, enabling civil society involvement in knowledge sharing, decision making and resource management. A comprehensive stakeholder analysis is essential.

If multi-sector partnerships are to move from rhetoric to reality, a much more sophisticated understanding is required of the nature of relationships between and among the partners and the

quality of engagement: its depth and breadth, short and long-term, and shifting over time. Robust strategies are needed to deal with disagreements or disputes and to manage the emergence of winners and losers which is inevitable – even if only in the perceptions of the stakeholders involved. The full range of options for management of relationships and multi-sector engagement must be utilised, depending on the situation, from informal, undocumented understandings to contractual obligations embodied in formal agreements negotiated among equals. The socio-economic and institutional contexts must also be taken into account, drawing on policy and regulatory frameworks, emerging standards of governance, cultural and political values and the stage of development or capacity of each partner to engage.<sup>11</sup>

### Some practical suggestions

The addition of civil society to public and private partnerships is relatively new, but there is now a significant body of work available which documents best and worst practice and provides the tools for management of multi-sector engagement. Independent, expert brokering is essential, as is the delineation of measurable goals and the development, jointly, of accountability mechanisms.<sup>12</sup>

To leverage ‘civil society’ engagement, a long-term strategy is required which starts with clearer communication of the benefits of engaging in relation to its costs, with consideration also given to the costs of non-engagement. Deliberate effort is required to create opportunities for civil society (and on a global scale, developing country) inputs to policy and decision making, paying particular attention to issues of gender and the participation of young people. Discernment and sensitivity are required to map and manage overt and covert power paradigms to maximise the integrity of the process.

In planning the implementation of multi-sector partnerships “hilltops to oceans” (H<sub>2</sub>O-MSP), it is essential to resource civil society participation. Greater effort is needed to redress the skew in distribution of resources between public, private sector and community priorities (as also between developed and developing countries) in regard to scientific research, project implementation) and capacity building<sup>13</sup>. Public and private sector partners are better able to resource their needs and funders are pre-disposed to question community priorities and distrust local capabilities – sometimes with good reason. They are also pre-disposed to favour large high technology interventions when smaller-scale, older technology approaches could well be more effective.

To be effective, the H<sub>2</sub>O MSP strategy must be accompanied by capacity building initiatives to support better design and management of complex relationships. Effective management of horizontal and vertical relationships will unmask duplication of effort and require honesty in dealing with silo thinking and competitive behaviour on the part of key stakeholders.

For its part, civil society, in its various forms, will need to deal with its own set of issues: efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and accountability and communication. Much more can and should be

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<sup>11</sup> Kilby P (2001) Social Capital and Civil Society, Phd Thesis chapters National Center for Development Studies, ANU

<sup>12</sup> BPD Water and Sanitation is an informal network of partners who seek to demonstrate that strategic partnerships involving business, government and civil society can achieve more at the local level to improve access to safe water and effective sanitation for the poor than any of the groups acting individual <http://www.bpd-waterandsanitation.org>

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Sachs: **Today’s world is divided not by ideology but by technology. This demands, Jeffrey Sachs argues here, bold new thinking on development \***  
[http://www.cid.harvard.edu/cidinthenews/articles/Sachs\\_on\\_globalisation.htm](http://www.cid.harvard.edu/cidinthenews/articles/Sachs_on_globalisation.htm)

done to strengthen civil society organisation and management, clarifying roles and responsibilities, improving performance measurement and making the business case for greater involvement on the basis of evidence of added value. To a large extent, the primary responsibility for ensuring greater civil society engagement rests with civil society partners themselves.

### **Ambition and action**

The global village is facing unprecedented challenges to human security and well being. The Millennium Development Goals are a call to action, to greater ambition in relation to poverty reduction and sincere commitment to greater collective effort, beyond aid.

From hilltops to oceans, integrated water resources management in catchments and communities will link industrial, agricultural, recreational users in rural, urban, coastal and ocean environments. The "information revolution" can help leverage the potential of multi-stakeholder engagement by using information communication technology to democratise access to knowledge and improve knowledge management. As our world shrinks, developed and developing country partners – governmental, private sector and civil society – urgently need to find ways to tap the synergy of innovative, pro-active partnerships which move beyond the rhetoric of community participation to vigorous, civil society engagement.