The Growing Importance of Civil Society in Development Issues - A European Union Perspective
By Anne-Mieke Minderhoud

The 1980s and 1990s saw an increasing number of civil society organisations question the ruling authoritarian regimes in their countries. Through public debate, campaigns, street demonstrations and other forms of popular mobilisation (Robinson & Friedmann 2005), they played a crucial role in the democratic transitions of Latin America and eastern and central Europe.

These events raised the international profile of civil society. Grassroots participation became celebrated as a major source of social and political change (Willets 2008) and as a valuable instrument able to smooth democratisation processes in the developing world (IDS 2008).

The promotion of civil society has become a fundamental principle of EU’s development policy. This essay first explores why this is - by examining the geopolitical context, the changing perspectives in development thinking and the organisation’s own internal challenges. Second, I look at how civil society plays a role in EU’s response to these factors through increased coordination, decentralisation and politicisation of its development policy. Finally, I consider what critiques and challenges the EU faces in their aim to involve civil society as an essential development actor.

Background: Changing Contexts and Perspectives

EU’s current development policy evolved alongside the global political trends and events of the past two decades: starting with the end of the Cold War which spiraled the dominance of the so-called Washington Consensus (Carbone 2008-b). The promotion of continuous growth and competition which would allow for a ‘trickle-down’ process of social change as long as the internal dynamic of the market was not hindered lay at the basis of Structural Adjustment Programmes of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The deregulation of markets and the privatisation of public enterprises and organisations were pushed through at great speed in many developing nations (Allen & Thomas 2000). Trade liberalisation and globalisation, accompanied by democratic institution-building, was ‘the new international context that the EU was obliged to recognize, acknowledge and embrace’ (Holland 2002:198).

But the liberalisation and globalisation agenda did not come without challenges and in the ‘90s reality and the media increasingly showed that the world had become divided between the affluent and those living in ‘dehumanizing poverty, servitude and economic insecurity’ (Korten in Allen and Thomas 2000:19). Criticism of the top-down and predominantly Western economic agenda of development gained foothold as witnessed by
the public demonstrations in 1999 during the World Trade Organisation round in Seattle. Civil society demanded to play a more influential role in international cooperation (Desesquelles 2000).

A more bottom-up human-needs centred idea on development gained popularity influencing leading policy makers to adopt a more participatory approach, involving local communities in development projects and to ‘soften’ the economic edge of their policies. The task of development was to overcome the challenges of globalisation and liberalisation through non-market interventions, intentionally changing a number of indicators that would enhance human existence and eradicate poverty. In 2000, The United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were drawn up by 187 nations as an declaration of intent to achieve these indicators by 2015. ‘Inclusive globalization’ focusing on these ‘human development concerns’ (UNDP 2008) came to direct contemporary development policy-making by leading donors like the US, the World Bank, the OECD, the United Nations, and the EU.

Apart from the criticism on the project of development itself, questions had also been raised with regards to what had happened with the aid money. Global citizens and media were increasingly putting both donors as well as development agencies under scrutiny (Cardone 2008-b). The lack of coherence between donors, the competition between agencies, the persistence of corruption, and the lack of involvement of developing nations’ citizens to hold those accountable that act in its interest brought the objectives of ‘Aid Effectiveness’, ‘Good Governance’, and ‘Local Ownership’ to the forefront. A call was made for result-driven aid through the harmonisation, alignment and management of development programmes within a clear set of monitorable actions and indicators and for transfering the ownership of development strategies to the countries and populations for which development was supposed to work (OECD 2005).

Civil Society as a Practical and Political Solution

Civil society came to play a major role in the global response to these criticisms and events at both policy and implementation level. For the EU this meant a shift towards increased coordination, decentralisation and politicisation of its development policy and approach.

During the ‘90s pressure by the member states on the EU to increase accountability, transparency and efficiency regarding its aid programmes had been mounting. The EU aid system was found to be ‘too complex and fragmented’ and policies were ‘guided by instruments rather than by policy objectives and clearly defined priorities’ (CEC 2000 in Arts & Dickson 2004:108). EU aid was considered ‘a mess’, poor in terms of aid effectiveness,
project duplications, policy contradictions and it faced serious questions regarding its added value as a development donor in its own right\(^1\) (Carbone 2008-b; Dearden 2008).

To streamline development policies of both the EU and the individual member states, the European Consensus on Development was signed on 20 December 2005, whereby EU Member States, the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission agreed to a common EU vision of development: the eradication of poverty in the context of sustainable development, including the achievement of the MDGs (EC 2005). Furthermore, to ensure policy coherence, programme complementarity and coordination in implementing external assistance programmes, EuropeAid was established in 2001 managing EU external aid programmes worldwide (EuropeAid 2008).

With the global support for liberalisation and decentralisation, the role of the state was changing. Ownership and responsibility gradually shifted away from the Community to developing countries, so-called ‘partner countries’. Emphasis was placed on working in close collaboration not only with international organisations and governments of developing countries on the design of national development strategies, but also with civil society as a main implementing actor (Desesquelles 2000; Arts & Dickson 2004).

To aid the transition from central to local ownership of development strategies, the EU introduced Country Strategy Papers (CSPs) and National Indicative Programmes (NIPs) to be designed by the partner country itself. Once a CSP had been agreed by both the EU and the partner country the EU would commit itself to the transfer of aid in the form of general budget support towards the partner country’s national treasury (Carbone 2008-b), which marked a shift from direct project funding.

Internally, civil society provided the EU a platform for establishing its own added value, its complementary role, in relation to the development done by the member states. The EU would focus on the strengthening of civil society as development actors (Arts & Dickson 2004; Carbone 2008-a/b; Dearden 2008).

**Re-designing Policy: The Cotonou Agreement**

Civil society’s political role would also increase, just as EU’s own development policy was becoming more political in its nature. The enlargement of the EU after the end of the Cold War intensified EU’s ambition to move beyond its economic power and become recognised as a major global political actor. The introduction of a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CSFP) in 1992 being a clear expression of that ambition (Holland 2002; Arts & Dickson 2004; Brotherton & Vogler 2006; Dearden 2008).

\(^1\) Development policy within the EU exists as a ‘two-level game’, with member states conducting individual national development policies, and the European Commission a ‘European’ development policy (Putnam in Farrell 2008).
The CSFP impacted EU’s development policy by broadening it geographically and policy-wise (Cardone 2008-b), formally linking together the ‘political, security, economic and development aspects of EU external relations at large’ (Arts & Dickson 2004:106). Foreign policy was increasingly becoming a joint European effort which meant that ‘development cooperation should logically follow and support’ (Development Commissioner Poul Nielson in Arts & Dickson 2004:107). The incorporation of EU’s development policy within the CFSP meant that the former had to contribute to the goal that was set for the latter: developing and consolidating democracy and the rule of law, respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms (Arts & Dickson 2004).

This politicised EU’s development cooperation as political dialogue was ‘no longer a taboo’ (Holland 2002:197). The EU increasingly started making proactive attempts to promote its own internal values externally (Brotherton & Vogler 2006) and development was seen to be at the heart of EU’s external action, along with its foreign, security and trade policies (EC 2008).

Civil society was to play a vital role as promoters of democracy, social justice and human rights (Arts & Dickson 2004) and its promotion became legally institutionalised in the successor of the Lomé Conventions, ACP-EU’s agreement on development cooperation: the Cotonou Partnership Agreement².

Prior to Cotonou, limited opportunities existed for civil society as the Lomé Conventions adopted an essentially government-to-government approach (Holland 2002). Although Lomé IV had started to incorporate a more -albeit unsuccessful- decentralised cooperation in 1990 through the support of local initiatives (Carbone 2008-a), in principle ACP-EU cooperation largely kept decentralised actors out.

But the dominant liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation policies and the call for ‘Aid Effectiveness’, ‘Good Governance’ and ‘Local Ownership’ pushed the support for broad participation of all stakeholders in countries’ development to the forefront. Civil society became a vehicle through which citizens could participate in and influence public affairs, carrying the potential to strengthen popular empowerment, enforce political accountability, and improve the level of governance (IDS 2008).

The degree of involvement of civil society was one of the most controversial issues during the negotiations between the ACP countries and the EU. Within the ACP, the majority of governments feared that opening Lomé to ‘non-state actors’ (NSAs)³ would further weaken

---

² Although the promotion of civil society is also formalised in articles 19 and 25 of the Development Cooperation Instrument for Asia and Latin America, this essay focuses on the EU’s partnership agreement with the ACP countries as cooperation between the EU and ACP has a longer and more elaborate development history.

³ The term non-state actors (NSAs) was introduced by the Commission in its communication on participatory approaches (Participation of non-state actors in EC Development Policy 2002). It includes three different categories: civil society, social partners such as trade unions and employers associations, and private sector groups (Carbone 2008). This essay will use the term CSOs to describe the EU’s commitment to civil society promotion.
the role of the state (Carbone 2008-b). To transform and decentralise development by involving CSOs and other NSAs whereby some might be in conflict with their government, was a sensitive issue (Holland 2002). Nevertheless, agreement was reached in 2000 promoting participatory approaches and ensuring the involvement of civil society and economic and social players.

The Cotonou Partnership Agreement objective set out to build the capacity of all actors in development and improve the institutional framework necessary for social cohesion, for the functioning of a democratic society and market economy, and for the emergence of an active and organised civil society (EC, Cotonou Agreement, art. 1). Participation was defined to be one of the four core principles of cooperation: ‘Apart from central government as the main partner, the partnership shall be open to different kinds of other actors in order to encourage the integration of all sections of society, including the private sector and civil society organisations, into the mainstream of political, economic and social life’ (EC, Cotonou Agreement, art. 2).

Good Intentions Do Not Match Reality

The Cotonou Partnership Agreement consolidated EU’s commitment to promoting civil society as a deliberate element of and instrument for development. But good intentions ‘do not always match reality’ (Carbone 2008:243).

The EU has set a very ambitious agenda for civil society to achieve. Whether it is actually capable of the democratisation qualities it is viewed to have by the EU, is not backed up by firm evidence of success (Holland 2002; Robinson & Friedmann 2005; Carbone 2008-a/b; Alliance2015 2008-a/b). Initial research and evaluations show little systematic and qualitative participation by civil society (Crawford 2002; Stocker 2003; Robinson & Friedmann 2005; Alliance2015 2008-a/b).

First, the EU is accused of prioritising its own political and economic interests (ACP Civil Society Organisations 2008; Concord 2008; BetterAid 2008) by being too preoccupied with demonstrating its capability to ensure increased coordination and complementarity to the member states, instead of making sure that the voices of all the recipients in the design of national development strategies are indeed heard (Carbone 2008-a).

Second, environments conducive to civil societies are lacking or fragile in many developing countries. Agreement to Cotonou does not automatically mean that domestic reforms supporting the agreement are in fact implemented. The EU states that CSOs need to take the initiative to respond to the opportunities presented to them by the EU (EC 2001; Carbone 2008), but general notions of ‘civil society’ are often very optimistic and disregard the ambiguities and conflicts inherent in real civil societies (IDS 2008). This makes it extremely
difficult, if at all possible, for CSOs to participate, let alone initiate. The potentially positive impact of civil society is hard to realise in countries where states are strong and civil organisations still weak or where internal or external conflicts undermine democratic culture and processes. Civil societies need an environment that enables them to fulfill their role (Robinson & Friedmann 2005; Alliance2015 2008-a/b).

Third, the EU is inconsistent in enforcing its democratic conditionalities. The EU development planning process includes an analysis of the situation in the developing country in terms of democracy and human rights, including women’s rights; the rights of the child; the functional separation of powers; and the status of the civil society. Based on this analysis, the Commission determines whether or not the level of governance is sufficiently inclusive for the provision of general budget support. However, the EU appears willing to provide significant amounts of aid even when it judges the situation of a partner country deficient in crucial areas (Alliance2015 2008-b). Unless the fundamental principles the EU states in its development policy are respected and promoted, the quality and the purpose of the political dialogue through the promotion of civil society will be marginalised and regarded as little more than ‘cosmetic conditionality’ (Holland 2002:203).

Fourth, the general budget support system undermines CSOs’ independence. Budget support can only be an effective instrument when it is implemented in a situation of inclusive and democratic governance whereby civil society can perform its task as an independent government watchdog. But a precondition to EU funding of CSOs, is that only those CSOs will be supported if they and their activities are identified in the country’s national development strategy. As the budget support connected to this strategy is transferred directly into the partner country’s national treasury, this makes the involvement of CSOs highly dependent on the political will of the partner government to allocate the necessary financial resources for CSOs to become successful development actors (Alliance2015 2008-b). If CSOs only become subcontractors to their own governments, their ability to hold governments to account and exert influence in terms of advocacy and empowerment will be severely constrained (Alliance2015, 2008-a). Not all donor funding for CSOs should be channeled through national governments, in order to ensure that politically-independent resources are available to CSOs (Alliance2015, 2008a).

And finally, constructive mechanisms to empower civil society and achieve equal opportunities for all citizens are missing. Effective participation by CSOs through institutionalised dialogue between all parties involved in development, is regularly frustrated by the short time set aside for consultation and the ‘arbitrary selection of civil society organisations’ as those able to command a disproportionate share of foreign aid resource are urban-based intermediaries led by middle class elites (Hearn 1999; Eurostep 2003; Robinson & Friedmann 2005; Alliance2015 2008a; Carbone 2008-b).
To achieve democratic ownership attention needs to be paid to strengthening the mechanisms for national ownership across a broader range of stakeholders (Alliance2015, 2008a). Without adequate institution-building (for government and for civil society) the implementation capacity for many partner countries will be unchanged. Ownership needs to go beyond ‘government ownership’ to include civil society, women’s organisations and parliament in the formulation and delivery of development policies. The EU should develop mechanisms through which the CSOs can play a role in monitoring the programmes and provide the necessary financial support to do so (Holland 2002; Carbone 2008; Alliance2015 2008-b).

Conclusion

The EU puts great value on the role played by civil society in development processes as a functioning civil society is seen as key to the consolidation of democracy (Holland 2002 italics added). The development process draws together the interests of donors, recipient governments and citizens north and south which is why it is an inherently political process (Brohman 1996; Alliance2015 2008-a). Democratic ownership assumes the existence of strong governments, a shared vision among actors with high levels of consensus, low levels of ‘clientelism’ and high levels of confidence between social actors (Robinson & Friedmann 2005), but liberal democracies can take a long time before materializing, if they materialize at all; free and fair elections, the freedom to participate in autonomous organisations outside the influence of the state, an elected legislature, an independent judiciary and an accountable political executive are ‘hardly universal’ (Robinson & Friedmann 2005).

The EU acknowledges the political character of civil society but it pays insufficient attention to the socio-economic and political contexts in which civil society is supposed to contribute towards development change and increased government accountability. All EU development policies have to work within a dynamic, whether welcoming or hostile, context. This dynamism demands constant change, adaptation, and critical assessments of these policies. If EU’s aim is to prove the rhetoric of promoting civil society right, then making sure civil society has the appropriate mechanisms and funding in place to establish a democratically enabling environment should be one of its key development policy priorities.

References


