

Confronting the State, Engaging the State

Civil Society Building Strategies under Adverse Political Conditions

Seminar May 10 2005, The Hague, The Netherlands

Hivos and ISS have joined in partnership to develop a Knowledge Network on civil society building in the context of international development. The network consists of four main components: a web platform, a research component, a training component and an annual seminar.

May 10-11 2005, Hivos and ISS host a seminar around the topic of civil society building under adverse political conditions. The seminar will focus on the relation between civil society and the state.

Background

Although the role of the nation state in many instances seems to be diminishing by ongoing globalization processes, the state is still a crucial actor for the reduction of poverty and inequality. Many civil society organizations consider the core of their work as influencing governmental policies, in order to enhance democratic governance and press for a more just distribution of resources, services, opportunities, etc. However, where the state is weak, politically unstable or oppressive, as in many developing countries, such civil society efforts often have very limited effects or are even completely neutralized. In cases of weak states, CS sometimes marginalizes the state even further (with help of donor funding) by taking over its responsibilities, for example in service delivery.

The other side of the coin is, that experience – supported by recent research – indicates that civil society flourishes where democracy is strong. A strong and responsive state is generally more conducive to the emergence of a strong civil society than a state characterized by conflicts, corruption and/or a lack of democratic governance.

The seminar aims to explore the strategies civil society organizations in various political contexts use with the aim of influencing and strengthening the performance and responsiveness of the state. We will analyze cases from different situations of adverse political conditions, such as post-conflict, transitional and oppressive states as well as situations where the state is weak because of corruption, debts, lack of capacity, etc. Strategies ranging from contestation and confrontation to co-operation with the state will be questioned and analyzed on effectiveness and on their consequences for position, identity and legitimacy of civil society (organisations). What works under which conditions, what new and creative arrangements have been recently explored, what are the opportunities and which risks do they entail? Can we find common processes in countries from different regions? What variables seem to be of influence under similar conditions? And how may donors such as Hivos improve their support to civil society organizations in engaging the state?

Hivos and its partners have ample experience working towards increasing citizen participation aimed at improving government responsiveness to civil society, through diverse initiatives combating corruption, enhancing accountability and transparency of government, etc. A number of participating partners were asked to reflect on the following questions:

What are the particular preconditions in your country that enable or obstruct civil society building strategies of your organisation?

Based on your experiences, how do initiatives and strategies of your organisation contribute to improving the responsiveness and performance of the state?

Responses are included below. By analyzing a number of their case studies, coming directly from CSO practice, and exploring outcomes of research in this field, we aim to generate lessons for civil society building efforts under adverse political conditions and identify what different stakeholders can contribute to this process.

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Arjun Karki, Nepal
SAAPE (South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradiction)

Sharing Experience of Civil Society Building

- *What are the particular preconditions in your country that enable / obstruct civil society building strategies of your organization?*
- *Based on your experiences, how do initiatives and strategies of your organization contribute to improving the responsiveness and performance of the state?*

In Nepal, civil society structures have developed only since the establishment of democracy in 1990. Since then, the building of civil society has followed both the strategies of 'involvement of' and 'confrontation with' the State. Both the strategies flow from the provisions of the 1990 Constitution which envisions a plural, equal and liberal society in which civil society organisations will have a crucial role to play. The Constitution engages both the State and civil society in social, economic and political processes. But in practice, the State has often chosen to act on its own, sometimes even undermining the constitutional spirit thus inviting the confrontational role of civil society. Civil society has repeatedly needed to mobilise in protest in order to force the elected parliamentary representatives to enact laws in the interests of the people (such as those in favor of more equality for women) and to get existing laws meaningfully implemented.

The Constitution in theory provides an enabling environment, but in practice, State policies and programmes have not been that encouraging. The relationship between state bodies and civil society organisations has gradually deteriorated as the democratic space in Nepal has decreased, initially after the dissolution of the government on October 4th 2002, and even more after the King's takeover on February 1st 2005.

Encouraging developments

1. Surge of human rights and social awareness campaigns in the 1990s, leading to the establishment of numerous civil society organisations at various levels
2. Community organising (organisation of peasants, women, Dalits, Kamaiyas, ethnic communities), leading to:
 - emancipation of Kamaiyas
 - creation of human rights institution (National Human Rights Institution)
3. Development of independent, private media, including community radio stations

Setbacks

Following the escalation of violence (particularly after 2001), the State has viewed civil society organisations with increasing suspicion. The Maoist insurgents are also suspicious of development organisations and seek to co-opt them to their cause, or force their compliance. At the grass roots level, NGO staff are trying to implement development programmes in an environment characterised by violence, insecurity, and human rights abuses. In many parts of the country, the infrastructure of the state is confined to district headquarters, and communities are not able to access government services.

In the current context, NGO staff are struggling to work with communities facing the following realities:

- Migration: people, in particular able-bodied men and youths, are leaving their villages to seek more secure livelihoods elsewhere, or to escape violence or forced conscription by the Maoists. The communities left behind are increasingly vulnerable.
- Development work has decreased and therefore general infrastructure is falling apart
- There is a dynamic of disempowerment: long standing structural poverty + conflict-created problems + population movement = disempowerment
- This is coupled with the erosion of democracy and the dissolution of power structures at the grassroots level, and together these lead to a decreased ability of villagers to maintain the development space
- Disengagement of the state from service provision, from the provision of democracy, institutions etc.
- Human rights abuses, curtailment of basic freedoms such as freedom of movement and communication, which hamper all attempts at organising by civil society groups

Since February 1st, the State has not been engaging in dialogue with civil society at all - in fact it has taken the opposite position: arresting and harassing NGO workers, journalists, academics, lawyers, human rights defenders and others, limiting their freedom of movement, and curtailing their freedom to work.

Strategies to improve responsiveness

Rural Reconstruction Nepal is a grassroots organisation working to empower rural communities. Its mission is to improve the lives of the rural poor, particularly rural women, small farmers, landless people and other disadvantaged and socially oppressed groups in Nepali society, through providing them opportunities for their own socio-economic empowerment. RRN has a two pronged strategy:

- To conduct action-oriented research and implement development programmes focusing on the poorest of the poor, socio-economically vulnerable people and their sustainable rural livelihoods
- To raise awareness through campaigns and advocacy at the local, national and international levels about the root causes of poverty, the problems of the poor, socio-economic and cultural rights and the right to development.

Its key themes are education and awareness; sustainable livelihoods; health; and self-government.

RRN's approach - of community empowerment coupled with national and international level advocacy on the root causes of poverty - has enabled it to gain the trust and support of grassroots communities, as well as having a profile at an international level. This means that, in the current context of the conflict, RRN has been able to continue working at grassroots level when other organisations have had to withdraw from rural areas. At the same time, it is at risk of state harassment because of its vocal support for human rights and democracy.

RRN considers it vital in the current context to do all we can to keep open the space for civil society, and is developing different strategies to do this in the context of conflict and the suspension of democratic rights. Over the past five years, as the conflict escalated, RRN's strategy remained to support rural communities to empower them and enable them to engage with government bodies to demand their development needs, or to have the skills to negotiate their needs with the Maoists. This was supported by advocacy on specific issues directly with the government, and behind-the-scenes support for nascent peace processes.

In the current context, new strategies are required:

- Civil society organisations such as RRN are not able to engage directly with government representatives. Instead, strategies have to focus on working with international organisations - both donor bodies and civil society organisations - to

raise awareness of what is happening in Nepal and apply pressure to the government via international support groups.

- At the same time, RRN must continue to support rural communities, both to avert a humanitarian and human rights crisis, and to attempt to maintain some civil society space for communities squeezed between the parties to the conflict. It is clear that working with grassroots communities will no longer lead to changes in government policy, but it may enable communities to defend their livelihoods and basic rights.
- Grassroots conflict resolution work is key to supporting and empowering communities, which may enable them to continue local level dialogue with government officials and Maoists to demand the maintenance of basic services
- Civil society groups must understand the link between human rights abuses and the maintenance of democratic space - the continued suspension of democratic rights will inevitably lead to an increase in the abuse of civil and political rights, but also to increasing abuses of economic, social and cultural rights as communities struggling in poverty see their rights to food, water, health, shelter and education eroded further by the conflict and the collapse of government service provision.

Conclusion

RRN and other Nepali NGOs that take a rights-based approach are not in a position at the moment to build civil society, but are working to stop it being destroyed. At the same time, there are possibilities for positive developments as people realise that the absence of government in any real sense means they have to make their own choices, and run their communities for themselves. This can be both positive - for instance, the Kathmandu Post recently reported on a village which had established its own water supply system; and negative - such as vigilantes taking the law into their own hands and attacking suspected Maoists. Thus the role for NGOs working at the grassroots is vital for the long-term future of Nepal.

Alex Ruhunda, Uganda
KRC (Kabarole Research Centre)

"Confronting the state, and engaging, the state in civil society Building strategies" Conditions that enable or obstruct civil society building strategies

Introduction/Background

Uganda has gone through drastic socio-economic and political changes since the National Resistance Movement government captured power through a protracted guerrilla war 1981-1986. The NRM government main political concern was restoration of democracy and fundamental human rights for the people of Uganda. This was manifested in the 1995 constitution that was quite elaborate on a lot of political issues including term limits for the presidents to avoid emergency of dictators and abuse of power by leaders. The provision on term limits of the 1995 constitution is a fundamental block for a stable and democratic country.

The current situation depicts a total shift of the very leaders who had vested lots of energy in the 1995 constitution where they promulgated that:

"Recalling our history which has been characterised by political and constitutional instability; recognising our struggles against the forces of tyranny, oppression and exploitation, committed to building a better future by establishing a socio-economic and political order through a popular and durable national Constitution based on the principles of unity, peace, equality, democracy, freedom, social justice and progress....."

The very leaders are now using if not, more energy to undo what they look at as stumbling blocks in their quest to remain in power. The political environment is worsening as the transition process seem to be taking a centre stage in a rather weak and vulnerable society that has no capacity to determine the future of the country leaving it in the hands of the political elites who have got their own agenda. It is important to note that what could now look like enabling factors for NGOs, that are embedded in the 1995 constitution could change any time as the political environment is threatening the stability of the constitution.

Enabling factors

The Civil society and mainly NGOs are playing a complimentary role to government efforts for eradication of poverty to fulfil vision 2015 and the UN millennium goals. This has given NGOs the impetus to participate in the processes of Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP). The framework lays out four major pillars; improved quality of life of the poor, increased income, Good governance and security, conflict resolution and Disaster Management.

Existing Gap

The NGOs over time have concentrated on service delivery programmes which directly target the poor and disadvantaged groups and leaving a very crucial role of monitoring government performance. This has led to weak institutional building processes, most especially portrayed by the reluctance by the government to appreciate the role of CSOs/NGOs in monitoring and influencing government policies. Government considers CSOs engaged in policy advocacy more of opponents than partners in development process.

Obstructive Issues

- The Political transition process from one political system to multi party system is creating a challenging environment for policy advocacy NGOs. Most times, issues related to the amendment of the constitution have made advocacy NGOs take a

similar stand with the opposition as is the case with lifting of the presidential term limits.

- The current Proposed NGO bill gives government too much control on the activities of NGOs. Some of the proposals by the state/government in the NGO bill for example; if an NGO is against government policy, government has the power to deregister that NGO. Operational permits will be issued annually and Intelligence organs will be represented on the Boards of the NGOs.
- Top-down hierarchical culture and lack of institutional building capacities; In the first instance, it has been/is tradition for the governments in Uganda due to policies instated by the donors like the World Bank (*Washington consensus of structural adjustment programmes*) to approach development work, from a perspective of top-down approach with little knowledge of the local context. This culture has transformed and instilled into structures of the government, with most government technocrats not conceptualising the context in which they work.
- Political immaturity has led to a culture of intolerance as those who wield power find it extremely difficult to tolerate divergent views. This has created an intimidating environment for policy advocacy by NGOs like KRC as the movement cadres quickly associate our activities with the opposition.
- International -donors (external)

Disempowering donor policies have created weak CSOs that are donor driven and in most cases, work to fulfil donor interests with less effort to be accountable to their people. Many of the projects are designed and determined by donors who are interested in specific short term projects, that do not reflect the integration concerns on the ground and this has made it difficult for NGOs to engage government in meaningful policy issues.

Responsiveness and performance of the state

Apparently, there is realisation by the civil society that Government is the biggest actor in development, first because it collects taxes and accesses basket funding to facilitate development projects and programmes and is expected by its citizens to deliver services given the set commitments. This more often is affected by high levels of corruption due to the fact that the civil society monitoring role was not high emphasised.

In a way the people have been looking at government as their boss who is the great provider as they wait to receive and this has enhanced the culture of political patronage and manipulation. The community especially in rural areas have not been exposed to understanding their rights and obligations in questioning and monitoring government programmes. This has led to unsustainable community development efforts.

The KRC Approach

KRC is striving to improve the responsiveness and performance of the state that is advocating for social participation in issues of governance and economic emancipation of Ugandans. The focus is on the involvement of the local communities in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of government and civil society programmes in Policy development and review. This is being done through; Poverty Resource Monitoring and Tracking (PRMT); A model designed by KRC for the communities to be able to monitor and influence government policies and seeking for transparency and accountability, increased participation of the citizens in policy formulation and reviews, harmonisation of policy procedures of government and civil society through dialoguing-(an important emphasis) for instance on programmes of eradicating poverty, new technologies like GMOs and Organic farming.

Synergy for net working to advance formidable civil society structures

KRC encourages inter-regional collaboration and networking for the integration of macro social and economic issues of conflict and economic developments in development processes. All the programmes of KRC are strongly advancing an empowering process to development where the rural communities are at the forefront as participants rather than benefactors and other actors giving the appropriate support for positive change. The Participatory Action Learning Sustainable System (PALS) approach has contributed greatly in strengthening a culture of responsibility and ownership among the rural communities in the Rwenzori region.

Mary Njeri Wanjiru, Kenya
CCCC (Citizens Coalition for Constitutional Change)

Kenya Country Preconditions

General

Kenya is located in the Greater Horn of Africa and straddles the Equator. It is bounded by Somalia to the east, the Indian Ocean to the southeast, Tanzania to the south, Uganda to the west and Sudan and Ethiopia to the north. Population Census (1998) indicates that there are approximately 30.5 million Kenyans with a growth rate of 2.1% per annum. Women comprise 53% of this population. There are forty-three ethnic communities, with diverse socio-cultural traditions, norms and practices. It is estimated that more than half the population lives below the poverty line. The poverty index is compounded by high HIV/AIDS prevalence, with 700 people dying daily. Kenya still experiences traditional male-female power imbalances; it makes it harder for a majority of women to own land and other assets and to move physically and socially to take advantage of socio-economic and political opportunities. There is no national gender policy, although there is a National Commission on Gender, which has been established by an Act of Parliament and a fully-fledged Department of Gender in the Ministry of Gender, Sports and Culture.

Enabling Preconditions

Relatively expanded democratic space since the December 27, 2002 General Elections.

Renewed networking and solidarity among likeminded reformist Civil Society Organisations, e.g. Multi-Sectoral Forum (MSF) Yellow Movement - Silent Revolution.

Re-discovery of self-esteem by citizens from the 2002 election experience. It revives the moribund 'Nationhood Project'. Hitherto, the Kenyan political class used negative ethnic nationalism (Tribalism) as a tool for political survival and retention of State power. Contestation for State power was informed by ethnic consciousness as opposed to issues.

Impact of a National Civic Education Programme (NCEP), implemented from 2001 to 2002. Greater sense of democratic civic culture inculcated among majority of citizens as manifested in voting pattern in the 2002 elections. Kenyans openly make their views known on a range of governance issues.

Establishment of Civil Society fronted statutory Kenya National Commission on Human Rights. Allows for strategic alliances and solidarity on issues e.g. transitional justice.

Impact of the Constitutional Reform movement. Kenyans were widely consulted on how the Kenyan State could be re-constituted and deconstructed. This has heightened interest and awareness on Constitutional issues.

Liberalised airwaves and a relatively free investigative print and electronic media. There is Media Council and media practitioners are organized into trade unions.

Community Based Organisations (CBOs) continue to emerge stronger and stronger. They complement the efforts of the larger NGOs such as 4Cs and are the key partners in the establishment of State de-regulating community networks at the local level.

A middle class threatened with marginalisation by the upper class political elites holding State power. They are being run out of sharing in spoils of State power. They are notable allies in efforts aimed at de-regulating the Kenyan State.

Inhibitive/Obstructive Preconditions

Abortive popular revolution of the 2002 General Elections. The National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) inspired regime change, but has betrayed the revolution. There are no revolutionary leaders in power but revivalists and retrogressive elements.

Challenges of new political dispensation. There is schism in Civil Society. Those who embrace the sense of arrival (mission accomplished) and those cautiously optimistic. Strategic leading lights of Civil Society have been co-opted or elected into government. Consequence, a Kenyan Civil Society suffering from Ecstatic Paralysis Syndrome (ECSPASY).

State social engineering to marginalize citizens from governance and developmental processes, e.g. impasse and legislative gerrymandering on Constitution Review Process.

Systemic reengineering of tribal cleavages by the political enjoying State power.

Intra-political party wrangling within (NARC) and bringing elements from the defeated former ruling regime and other parties into Government. This has spilled over into the Kenyan Civil Society

A self-serving National Assembly where reformist legislators are outnumbered, outmaneuvered, or compromised.

National instability. There is systemic insecurity with resurgence of xenophobic tribal conflicts and organized crime. These are symptomatic of State inspired violence.

Debilitating poverty conditions. Citizens, prioritize survival and existentialism.

Interventions Towards Improving Responsiveness & Performance of State

Development of a long term Strategic Plan (10 years, 2003 -2013). Systemic process - based approaches (SPA) foster sustainable social transformation and attitudinal change unlike episodic and eclectic interventions. SPA is the path to engender a reality in which Kenyan citizens internalize culture of constitutionalism, effectively contribute to, participate in and benefit from their society.

Adopting methodology focusing on organic building, changing and renewing of indispensable citizens institutions but not expendable organizations. Community Organising Tool (COT) is applied to realize this at the local level. The State is thus held accountable from below.

The Score Card Strategy, where citizens' institutions as in 3.2 above undergo critical analysis skills training and are facilitated to audit and report on State performance at the community level. The core of this strategy is exposure of State and its rating.

Strengthening networking of likeminded Civil Society Organisations in the Democracy and Human Rights sub-sector to revert to watchdog role vis-a- vis the State. Initiative augmented with solidarity linkages with likeminded regional and international Civil Society Organisations.

Facilitating linkages between community level citizens' institutions, multi-disciplinary middle class, policy formulation and national State organs. The State's national development agenda and priorities are thus informed from below.

Utilization and application of participatory interactive theatre/drama.

Embracing Information Communication Technology (ICT), e.g. *martus* and other interconnectivity tools including Internet and Cellular phones. Secures information flow and discrete communication.

Conclusion

On the whole, the 4Cs has, over the years adopted a variety of policy positioning in its relations with the Kenyan State. The overall pattern can be said to be constructive engagement. This is however in constant state of flux depending on whether the State is responsive and sensitive to citizens' aspirations and needs and whether it adheres to principle tenets of democracy, transparency, Constitutional governance, respect for human rights including women's rights and rule of law. In instances where the State is hostile, issue-based non-violent confrontation as in the case of Constitution Review Process is applied. Usually in such hostile situations the Low Profile High Impact Mechanism (LOPHIM) is resorted to. It is where citizens are discretely facilitated to organize around issues of common concern and then to pile multi-pronged popular pressure on the State to deliver on the issue.

At times strategic opportunities present themselves like in situations where there is confluence of interest between Civil Society and particular State organs. There are a number of examples to illustrate this, including collaboration in developing of legal frameworks, which led to the establishment of such statutory commissions as Constitution of Kenya Review Commission (CKRC), Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, the Gender Commission, the Council of Persons with Disability and elevation of the Women's Bureau to a fully-fledged Department in the Ministry of Gender, Sports and Culture. The role of Civil Society has been to provide intellectual, technical and professional inputs. The stance adopted by the 4Cs in such situations is arms-length constructive engagement as a caution against the danger of State manipulation or co-option. The policy then is to relate only on strategic issues of commonality, without seeking seats or positions within institutions being related to. The criterion is that engagements with the State are on basis of one-off technical inputs and thereafter disengagement is the rule of thumb.

ANNEXURE

The Citizens Coalition for Constitutional Change (4Cs): Organizational Profile

Established on 7th July 1994 and formally incorporated in 2002 in the Republic of Kenya as a Trust; the Citizens Coalition for Constitutional Change (4Cs), is a national membership organization with successful track record in popular constitutional reform, democratic constitutional governance and the rule of law, managed by firmly committed and capable professionals and community level volunteers. The organization was founded to work towards creation and maintenance of a new constitutional order in Kenya that will guarantee a better society desired by all citizens through a democratic process that is popular, open, participatory and inclusive. The 4Cs is a non-governmental, voluntary, non-partisan and not-for-profit social movement, with a vision of a Kenyan society that upholds practices and protects constitutionalism and democracy; where citizens participate in just governance, human rights are protected, gender equity is ensured, interests of the disadvantaged are guaranteed and a sustainable wholesome development is promoted. The 4Cs sees its mission as being to promote a just constitutional order in Kenya and empower its citizens to equally contribute towards this process.

The foundations of the 4Cs operations are its Constitution; Trust Deed, Directive Principles on Governance & Institutional Operations (DPGIO); Organisational Gender Policy and Strategic Plan 2003 - 2013. The Annual General Meeting (AGM), elected Steering Council with five Co-Chairs and Standing Management Committee of the Secretariat are the key governance organs of the 4Cs. Current programmatic and institutional directions of the 4Cs include,

Constitutional Education and Peace Programme; Political Empowerment and Governance Programme; Political Leadership Development Programme; Citizens Rights Advocacy Programme; Gender Mainstreaming; Resource Mobilization; Institutional Development and Governance; Staff Development; Citizens Resource Centre; Publicity and Networking.

Kepta Ombati, Kenya

NCEC (National Convention Executive Council)

The following is a synopsis of civil society engagement with state in Kenya

1. What is the civil society in Kenya responding to?

- A renegade government that is increasingly undermining the reform agenda, that has lost the confidence of the people of Kenya and the international community and that has failed to respond to the challenges of national reconstruction
- Monumental fragmentation in the civil society along ethnic, narrow and parochial lines including embracing into reactionary political activism
- Widespread paralysis in the same civil society that has been hitherto vibrant and proactive
- A Kenyan legislature that has engendered parliamentary tyranny and largely miscarried the hopes and trust of the nation
- Weak and demobilized Political parties that have stifled the political and governance processes in Kenya by failing to be effective vehicles of engagement
- A polarized nation divided along ethnic, regional, religious line

2. The challenges that the civil society is expected to provide leadership on include;

- Pushing for negotiations, drafting and enactment a new democratic Constitution
- Developing and consolidating a new progressive and reform-oriented leadership
- Seizing the opened democratic space to deepen democracy.
- Promoting strategies that would ensure realization of social justice and economic transformation
- Conceptualizing and expanding the Transitional justice agenda
- Securing for the establishment of good governance

3. How then does the civil society contribute towards overcoming the challenges?

- The civil society assist in broadening the scope of democratic transformation
- The civil society offer the vision, energy and through civic activism push to participate in the designing and implementing of reform agenda
- Auditing/ monitoring the state of the nation
- Setting out the character and Agenda for the civil society to pursue from the audit
- Hammering out a Strategy for strengthening Civil society participation in and driving the reform agenda

Dorotea Wilson, Nicaragua

Red de Mujeres Contra la Violencia (Network of Women against Violence)

"ADVOCACY WITH THE STATE, COMMITTING THE STATE, STRATEGIES TO BUILD CIVIL SOCIETY"

In representation of the Nicaraguan Network of Women against Violence.

What are your county's particular conditions that obstruct or limit the building of strategies by civil society and your organization?

Nicaragua is a poor country, located in the centre of America and colonized by the Europeans starting in 1502. After 300 years of slavery, looting of our resources and extermination of almost all aboriginal people, it achieved independence in 1821, together with the other countries of Central America.

Between 1821 and the first decades of 1900, the country was submerged in internal wars led by different factions of the Creoles, children of the European conquerors, who fought over control of the country. In 1936 a military dictatorship was established with the support of the US government. That Somoza family dictatorship lasted in power until July 19, 1979.

From 1979 to 1990 a revolutionary political process was promoted that tried to deal with the social injustices through a socialist project. In the revolutionary years, men and women participated massively in multiple aspects of national life, but the US Government supported a counterrevolutionary movement that involved the country in war for almost a decade.

Although women participated massively with the Sandinista revolution in the eighties and made our presence publicly and politically visible, we did not succeed in formulating public policies to deal with our specific demands, nor were issues such as machismo and violence against women discussed publicly.

Starting in 1990, Nicaragua began a pacification process and the construction of a civil rather than military state. An economic process determined by neoliberal policies was initiated that has involved reducing the state down to a normative apparatus, and designating private enterprise as the exclusive motor of the economy and the free market as the prevailing economic system. The political system is marked by formal democracy and unrestricted freedom of speech.

This history has meant that Nicaraguan society in general, organized or not, has been involved in frequent domestic wars and only now is trying to build a society in peace.

Moreover, globalisation and neoliberalism have produced a change in the country's social fabric, weakening its social movements, robbing of them of the role of demanding the rights of their base with the state and political society. The state, subordinated to the commands and conditions of the international financial institutions, has turned its back on civil society, to which it owes its position in power and in whose benefit it must govern, to the detriment of the democratic process and real participation by the citizenry in defending and exercising its rights.

In economic and social terms, the context does not favor the organization of civil society. Although the macroeconomic growth indicators show a positive trend, an economic crisis has intensified among the population, as numerous economic studies and development reports indicate.

The political transition begun in 1990 laid the groundwork for democracy, but it also encouraged the looting of state goods, and particularly the dismantling of the health and

education services, which officials justified with the pretext of "needing" to privatise the services provided by the government to benefit the vast majorities, and to reinstall a market economy that only favors big business and foreign investors.

The unfolding of this political system and the impact of the neoliberal policies has led to the prevailing fragmentation, lack of consensus and weakness of the social and political actors.

Despite everything, however, civil society is clearly a counterweight to the system's authoritarian tendencies; although dispersed and weak right now, it is still a counterbalance with greater potential than the media itself.

Specifying the particular conditions that limit the construction of strategies by civil society, we can mention:

1. The widespread poverty.
2. The low education levels of the vast majority of the population.
3. The incipient model of democracy that has only recently been implanted in the country and is still in construction.
4. The lack of a rule of law, which does, however, have a judicial structure that gives the population a framework to fight for its rights. We are building laws. The Nicaraguan parliament recently approved a law of civic participation.
5. High corruption levels and the lack of sensitivity by recent rulers to the nation's pressing problems and those of women in particular.
6. After years of military and political conflict, Nicaraguan society is very fragmented. The political system strengthens the power of political parties over the rest of society's organizations.
7. Nicaraguan civil society is still weak and fragmented, without a common agenda.

Based on your experience, how do your organization's initiatives and strategies help improve the state's responsibilities and commitments?

The Network of Women Against Violence is a broad, diverse and participatory arena of national coordination and advocacy of the Nicaraguan women's movement. Around 150 groups, associations, collectives, women's centers, Christian women's groups, unions, local networks and individual women participate voluntarily in the Network, through which we have a presence in 38 territories, including Nicaragua's Caribbean regions, where the country's indigenous and black population is concentrated.

We are organized in the Network because one of the most important and dramatic situations that Nicaraguan women face is the current physical, sexual and emotional violence within their family nucleus, including abuse of girls and boys by their fathers or another relative.

Our mission is "to transform the relationships of power to eradicate the domestic and sexual violence that attacks the dignity and the physical, psychic, moral, social and sexual integrity of women of all ages" by influencing the state and society in general.

The Network of Women Against Violence is currently recognized socially as an initiator of charges and promoter of consciousness-building campaigns against violence, as well as offering the means to make demands against it.

The Network represents Nicaragua's women to many people. The state recognizes it as women's interlocutor, as demonstrated by its inclusion in the government's consultation entities such as the Social and Economic Planning Council (CONPES) and the National Commission against Violence, among other advocacy arenas. This social and state recognition means at the same time that the Network is called upon to represent, speak about and participate in all sorts of situations that affect women.

As a coordinating entity for different expressions of the Nicaraguan women's movement, we have various positions regarding the state. Some have confrontational and accusatory positions and others opt for coordination. In general, we try to agree on common points and respect the actions of each organization in pursuit of specific objectives or goals.

In this context, we have promoted diverse strategies and actions to influence the state and society:

1. We coordinate actions with the Network's member women and organizations in the territories, supporting their struggles, demands, mobilizations and accusations.
2. We participate in civil society's coordination arenas such as the Civil Coordinator and the Federation of Nongovernmental Organisations, to build consensus regarding particular situations of the national reality.
3. We maintain coordination with the nongovernmental organisations and assistance centers that work especially with and on behalf of women.
4. We promote actions with municipal authorities to get them to include specific actions that benefit women in their policies and budgets, such as the providing property titles to women, including them in housing programs, etc.
5. We coordinate with the women representatives in the national parliament to promote laws on behalf of women or ensure that the laws being promoted include a gender focus.
6. We participate in coordination arenas with the state such as the Council of the Nicaraguan Women's Institute (INIM); the National Economic and Social Planning Council (CONPES); and the National Commission against Violence.
7. We coordinate with the Human Rights Defence Attorney's Office, particularly its Special Office for Women.
8. We promote actions directed to the judicial authorities so that trials are conducted according to law and not to the detriment of women.
9. We maintain a permanent position of denunciations via the media regarding the violation of women's rights and particularly acts of violence toward women.

Elva Terceros, Bolivia

CEJIS (The Centre for Legal Studies and Social Research)

What are the particular preconditions in your country that enable or obstruct civil society building strategies of your organization?

Even a diagnosis about the situation of the country, prepared by the World Bank (2004) developed like part of the Strategy from Attendance to the country (CAS), indicates that the crisis by which crosses Bolivia is integral, so it affects the economic, political and social scopes. From a structural perspective, the crisis of the country indeed is integral, since it is showing accumulated contradictions throughout the republican life: ethnic, social, regional conflicts and the situation of economic and political dependency.

About the economic situation the manifestations of the crisis are the following ones: lack of reduction of the poverty, high inequality level, vulnerability of the economy to the external shocks, precarious fiscal situation and the breach generated by the organic incorporation of the strategic sectors of the national economy to the transnational capital, that stops to cover this breach the State has resorted to the increase of the taxed taxes to the population, increase of the internal and external national debt, greater dependency with respect to the originating donations of the international cooperation, that place it in a high level of economic and political vulnerability.

In the political scope the crisis is pronounced in: political clientelism and tolerance or support to the corruption from the traditional political parties, exclusion of a multicultural perspective that integrates to the poor men and the indigenous towns.

The social crisis, on the other hand, is pronounced in: inequality, specially referred the distribution of lands, perception of the population about the little benefit of the operation of the natural resources (silver, tin, gas), elevated inequality levels and the polarities between urban and rural sectors; between the Altiplano and the Llanos; between indigenous and not-indigenous people.

How do initiatives and strategies of your organization contribute to improving the responsiveness and performance of the state?

Bolivia, in the last years, since the year 2000, lives a process in which the civil society has taken greater enhancement, due to the permanent oppositions to impositions on state policies. With the disadvantage that the organizations suitably are not structured so that its performance has greater effect.

In the popular field, the mobilizations of last the three years have shown the necessity to develop effective joints between the State and the Civil Society. The indigenous town of low lands and the original nations of the West - between May and June of 2003- they marched from Santa Cruz to La Paz demanding the Call to a Constituent Assembly that is not half-full unavoidably - for its integration by the political parties. This demand will be revived that already before had been expressed by the Unique Coordinator of National mobilization (April of 2001) and the Coordinator of Defense of the Water (September of 2001).

In February of this year the Constituent was incorporated to the constitutional text and exists the commitment of the President of the Republic to make it. The ideal would be that it takes ahead with a social and political pact.

The Constituent Assembly must face these structural problems in the direction of improving the conditions of the democracy.

The CEJIS works with some of the social, mainly rural organizations, located in low territories of the country and supports to their national instances, to face these activities has defined work strategies from a denominated program Political Incidence, that it has like objective to contribute to increase the capacity of incidence and governance of the organizations, mainly rural around their sectorial and national vindications.

In order to obtain that objective one considers to work in the organizational fortification of the instances of representation of the rural social sector, mainly, supporting them in the processes of reaffirmation of his identity and its organic fortification in legitimacy terms and representatively; also to support them in its joint with other organizations of its surroundings and other social sectors like urban - the popular ones.

Also we looked for to contribute to that the social organizations with whom we worked improve their capacity of lobbying before the levels of decision making of the public policies.

A fundamental question is the support to qualification processes, to understand the reality and to construct tools theoretical, methodological and practical to face it, this considering that the levels of mainly rural education in Bolivia are lowest, which forces to us to implement to use methods and techniques for education of adults.

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Written by Mahboubeh Abbasgolizadeh: The civil society in Iran currently involves a large spectrum of lively and active social, political and culture movements. At the same time, the Iranian political environment and power structure are moving ahead towards multi-polarity and the two radicalized sides of the existing struggles and challenges include republicanism and extremist Islamism. The Republicans demand a pure, democratic rule of the people over the people, while the extremist Islamists emphasize on religious fundamentalism. The reformists are in the middle of these two contending poles and try for a rational combination between republicanism and Islamic system. Since the trend of government during the pre-reform period was in favor of Islamism, the reformists laid emphasis on the consolidation of the republican aspects. The emergence of the reformists during the recent years and their plans for consolidation of democracy challenged the radical Islamists and created a number of crises which led to the polarization of the ruling system.

Prima facie the civil society may be regarded a logical product of the movements which were categorized between the two points of the spectrum, that is, republicans and the reformists. If this approach is correct, the civil society of Iran is a product of the suitable political atmosphere of the recent decade and hence one may conclude that the institutions of civil society enjoy democratic, republican values and criteria which are in contradiction with the forces on the other side of the spectrum (that is between the reformists and Islamists). Hence, the civil society of Iran is an outcome of the organized forces which are prone to challenge the forces on the other side and can play a role in the interests of democracy. The radical right (Islamists) and foreign observers (of international civil and political society) agree upon this viewpoint. They foresee that in the near future Iran may undergo a velvet revolution like what happened in Georgia...

Because of this probability, they argue, the radical right exerts pressure on the press and media as well as the Non-government Organizations and create an insecure atmosphere for the activists. On the other hand, most of the foreign analysts maintain that the civil society in Iran is somehow an alternative for the democratic changes like other countries.

But my experience as a feminist and activist with more than two decades (since 1985) of activities in the Non-Government Organizations, and a witness to many social and political developments, depicts another picture. In my opinion the history of civil society is longer than two decades. But the reform period helped the civil society to find its paradigm and discourse and helped its transformation into a self-conscious and goal-oriented process. On practical level too it had found its specific place in the social hierarchy and determined its interaction with the government. But this identification is not tantamount to the maturity of civil society rather it means a self-conscious birth. Hence, it is difficult to claim that the main feature of civil society in Iran is secularism and republicanism without paying attention to Islamism. Since the essence of civil society is based on democratic changes and pluralistic participation, even the right factions in the civil society inevitably accept the democratic values and actions.