



CIVIL SOCIETY

A key pillar of sustainability

Abstract

No development is possible until people are able to organise themselves; this is an essential foundation for self-determination and self-reliance. Civil society organisations enable people to articulate their needs, pursue common goals and so contribute to the shaping of political, social, cultural and economic life. In rural areas the focus is usually on providing social services, establishing institutional and physical infrastructure and dealing with issues concerning the use of natural resources and food security.

A strong civil society which participates in political processes and is actively involved in shaping development is essential for progress. Citizens' involvement is a significant factor in establishing fair economic and social development, fighting corruption and progressing towards gender equality, sustainability, democracy and the rule of law.

For all the above reasons, it is important to promote civil society organisations by strengthening self-help capacities and support civil society's ability to take part in political dialogue. This applies also in emergency aid situations and in fragile states. At the same time, the international community must increase political pressure on countries that suppress the creation of an active civil society. Respect for and exercising of human rights play a key role in this regard.

Village councils, water committees, trade unions, farmers' organisations, cooperatives, village women's meetings, NGOs and religious communities are all civil society institutions securing civic participation in social, economic, cultural and political life. When people organise themselves, they identify and articulate their problems strongly and find better, more thoughtful solutions. They can formulate their interests more precisely and put them forward more emphatically; they can strengthen their own and others' awareness of their rights as well as take hold of and defend their rights more effectively (cf. Section 6 on the right to food).

Civil society's self-organisation is important for self-confident participation in political discourse. It expands the understanding of democratic roles and processes. Civil society involvement opens up new opportunities for discussions and negotiations with state and international institutions. Civil society must become involved at local, regional, national and international levels to shape sustainable development. In the context of a rights-based approach, social security issues as well as institutional and physical infrastructure are of particular importance, along with all issues concerning natural resources and food security (cf. Sections 9 on land, 10 on water and 11 on agro biodiversity). However, it is not easy for people in remote rural areas to organise themselves on the regional or national level. In this context, strengthening community-based organisations (CBOs) is of particular importance.

A vital step is to involve public authorities and government bodies in the effort to improve living conditions sustainably so that the establishment of social structures parallel to those of the government are avoided; civil society organisations neither can nor should take on the state's responsibilities. However, depending on how legitimate and effective the national government is, civil society organisations do take on important tasks which may temporarily include services provided by the state. This is particularly the case in fragile states (cf. Section 4 on social security). In any case, state bodies must become accustomed to working with civil society organisations, because the latter will gain in self-confidence in their watchdog function, demanding transparency, accountability and the ensuring of their rights. Conversely, an effective civil society is an essential precondition for creating ownership (and hence sustainability) in respect to the achieved social progress. Civil society involvement is a significant factor for economic and social development, for fighting corruption and for progress towards gender equality, sustainability, democracy and the rule of law (cf. Section 7 on gender equality).

In order to shape development in their interest, people, organisations and societies must have sufficient capacity. Development of this capacity takes place on political, social, institutional

and individual levels. Spreading of information and awareness-raising should be included in school education and vocational training as well as in training programmes of staff in NGOs and state institutions. Comprehensive processes are necessary to implement capacity development successfully. NGOs must be strengthened in their competencies in recognising and describing problems, planning and administration for monitoring progress. In order to work effectively, they must be familiar with the legal issues and able to recognise and utilise options. The ability to think and act in economic categories is also important for promoting rural development. Social skills such as effective communication and conflict management are also required.

A lively civil society requires networking of individual organisations. This enables the different groups to learn from each other and to enter into powerful dialogue with relevant actors (e.g. public authorities, scientific institutions, politicians or companies). When organisations work together it increases their impact (critical mass). Networks are helpful in developing strategies for rural development and solutions to conflicts. They also provide platforms for organized advocacy.

Collaboration with partners in the South on equal terms is often the result of a long process of cooperation. However, partnerships with civil society organisations in the South are both the foundation and the goal of supporting self-help oriented development processes. Dialogue, solidarity, respect and mutual learning are the basis of capacity development. Cooperation based on mutual respect helps to identify the needs of the people on the ground, to ensure their rights and to encourage democratic behaviour.

In fragile states where the rule of law is not prevalent, trust in civil society organisations and their ways of working is particularly important. In this context, attention must be given to preventing violence. In both fragile and authoritarian states, the influence of civil society structures is very limited. Although civil society is exceptionally important in these two situations, it is usually underdeveloped and often harassed by powerful elites.

Welthungerhilfe's involvement in relation to strengthening civil society:

Supporting self-organisation and management skills as well as technical infrastructure of local NGOs and self-help groups.

Promoting dialogue and mutual learning.

Supporting cooperatives, trade unions, NGOs and local self-help structures as part of (self-reliant) civil society, identifying and strengthening their self-help potential. This also applies in emergency aid situations and in fragile states.

Promoting communication skills between local NGOs and self-help groups as well as strengthening their capacity for dialogue and assertiveness in claiming their rights.

Supporting programmes and projects for policy monitoring, lobbying and advocacy work.

Supporting activities for the mobilisation of resources and fundraising.

Supporting the networking of NGOs at local, regional, national and international levels to share experiences and to strengthen their capacity for influencing politics. At the same time, the involvement of NGOs from the South will be facilitated in respect to international debates on development policy in the North.

Welthungerhilfe's demands in relation to successful civil society involvement in rural development:

Donor countries must make sufficient funding available for sustainable, planned, effective support for NGOs which is not subject to any political or economic conditionality.

Donor countries should take into account the concerns of organised civil society groups; this will make ownership of development possible.

Developing countries must establish legal regulations which enable NGOs to pursue their justified concerns without disproportionate legal or formal obstacles.

This section is an excerpt of the WHH Position Paper Rural Development. Please also consult all other sections at www.welthungerhilfe.org/position-paper-rural-development

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