

ODI's Civil Society Partnerships Programme: Progress so far and Plans for Phase 2

A meeting for UK-based NGOs

at ODI 6th March 2006

Summary

The purpose of this half-day meeting was to share the results of the Civil Society Partnership Programme (CSPP) so far, discuss what we plan to do next and explore opportunities for collaboration and / or synergy with other UK-based organisations involved in similar activities (see Appendix 1). Thirteen participants came from ten organisations (see Appendix 2).

The first part of the meeting focused on presentations and discussions about progress so far and plans for the future (see the presentation). This included a brief description of the RAPID programme (www.odi.org.uk/rapid), an introduction to the Civil Society Partnerships Programme (www.odi.org.uk/cspp/overview), and more detail about progress over the last year (<http://www.odi.org.uk/cspp/Achievements/index.html>). Key points during the subsequent discussion included the following:

- CSOs are increasingly involved in policy processes and keen to use research-based evidence, but face many internal and external difficulties.
- Many UK-based NGOs (VSO, SCF, WaterAid and IIED) are already working closely with southern partners to generate and use research-based evidence for global campaigns.
- It is difficult to get the right evidence in the right format at the right time, and to ensure campaigns are legitimate and credible. International and national organisations need to be able to do this better.
- There is much good experience around and the toolkits and guidelines that ODI's CSPP is producing will be a useful addition.

The second part of the meeting focused on ODI's plans for Phase 2 to develop a network of organisations in the south that can help CSOs to do this better (see the presentation and http://www.odi.org.uk/cspp/Activities/Phase_2.html for more detail). Short presentations were also made about IIED's RING (www.ring-alliance.org) and INTRAC's PRAXIS Network (www.intrac.org/pages/praxis.html), to learn how they have built their southern networks. Key recommendations from the discussion included the following:

- The key ingredient is a shared commitment to a clear objective or set of activities which are mutually beneficial.
- Trust is more important than formal agreements, though they can help, and it is important to work out some of the relationship issues early on.
- It may take a long time to build the necessary degree of trust before the network can really work together and achieve tangible results. Not all members will take part in all activities and the network may be dormant for long periods.
- Evaluating the impact of research-based evidence on policy is hard. Harder still to measure the impact of this kind of work through networks.

Suggestions for Phase 2 work and possible collaboration included the following:

- More work on the role of evidence-based policy in less democratic contexts.
- Information sharing.
- E-meetings.
- A workshops on monitoring and evaluation.

Full Report

Session 1: How CSOs use research-based evidence

John Young welcomed and thanked attendees, explained meeting structure and explained background to RAPID and the CSPP (see presentation slides 1-16)

- Qu: In what ways can Southern Based Organisations get involved in policy debates?
- Ans: Will deal with this in Outcome 4

Julius Court then made a short presentation about what the programme has learned so far about how CSOs use research-based evidence (see presentation slides 17-23)

- Qu: Many organisations offer toolkits – how are ODI's different?
- Ans: They aren't specific advocacy guidelines – rather they focus on bridging the gap between research & policy. It is crucial to stress they are not exclusive - must always consider individual contexts & use as guideline to build on. Also they must cater for wide-range of 'users' – It's important to know exactly who you are targeting – intermediaries or specific advocates? Perhaps the lack of an overseas base for ODI could be an issue.

This was followed by a presentation by **Naved Chowdhury** on what the programme has learned so far about CSO capacity to use research-based evidence (see presentation slides 24-29).

- Qu: What type of strategic long-term partnership?-Committed to specific issues (if so who determines these?)
- Ans: Outcome 3 looked into this – Southern Voice Issues. Focus on Southern-driven agenda (country ownership). Debates over whether ODI should take advocacy position or be independent, credible academic org.

John Young finished off the presentations with a brief description of one of the global projects – The Forum for the Future of Aid (see presentation slides 30-32)

Subsequent discussion about how CSOs effectively use R.B.E to affect policy included the following points:

- Qu: Has CRSPP noticed re-occurring ideas? E.g. Using different types of evidence at different times.
- Ans: Yes – simple (not specific) reoccurring ideas – e.g. Importance of credibility (often enhanced by qualitative/ quantitative research); different types of evidence at different times; & common ideas such as the importance of using practical case studies (“seeing is believing”) over complicated statistics. Often it's not an issue of CSOs not having access to policy-makers but issues with their approach. But again - very important to consider different contexts.
- Nicola Jones (Save the Children): Practical case studies ARE very important BUT often policy makers want measurable indicators of previous success – STC find it hard to get apt. international figures & stats if no 'umbrella framework' in place (political issues).
- Nina O'Farrell (VSO): VSO's idea is to use evidence from their regional programmes to influence global discussions. Their big issue is how to coordinate getting excellent national-based research into global arena (not just ad-hoc)? To what extent is their role as an advocacy vehicle? (They've only started to consider this within the last year – need to put in long-term efforts to get true answers).
- Qu: How do VSO ensure they are representing their partners aptly?
- Ans: Consultations with partners & programmes to determine agenda. If there is an international opportunity – encourage partners to attend e.g. International AIDS conference in June. I.e. 'opening doors for partners'

- Belinda Calaguas (Water Aid): Many partners want to remain direct-service delivery only, but for those who do wish to get involved in advocacy (at any level – community, national, international) – funding from Water Aid can give them the capacity to have a voice. Also can use their reputation to introduce partners – “Using a space to engage partners”. Will be advisor for NGO networks if in need of technical know-how – e.g. Global/ Regional/ National Advocacy Meetings to discuss ideas/ share experiences/ negotiate priorities (& get partners involved in Regional/ National meetings).
- (VSO – similar ‘Links programme’/ email groups – partners from different countries can exchange ideas & experiences).
- Sonja Ruperal (Action Aid): Important for them to be credible & legitimate but also NOT a research org – area of tension. Partners perform research (specifically at grass-roots level). Capacity building takes time – need to recognise this & build it into plans from the start. Question of ownership of agendas is vital – NOT donor-driven – Research should be fundamentally Southern-led, but with North still playing important role – have to find the balance. Can force North to deal with uncomfortable issues – such as Southern resentment.
- Tom Bigg (IIED): ODI are starting to appreciate the issues UK-based NGOs have been facing for years – How to present evidence so it’s apt. for ALL readers? (from experts – local-level: who need to confirm that the findings are apt) e.g. Their Peer Review. The ‘intermediary’ role is not a static one – how to work strategically with ALL partners, to promote better understanding.
- Qu: Does ‘local-level’ review (as opposed to renowned institutions) impact the credibility of the research in policy-makers eyes?
- Ans: The research originates from ‘credible’ source (e.g. academic journals) & is reviewed by local-level orgs to make sure findings are apt in context.
- Qu: Advocacy is sometimes seen as ‘playing with fire’ – is it always the best strategy or better to keep quiet?
- Ans: Resentment to the idea of ‘Advocacy’, but it also includes informal chats/ seminars etc. Choice of language is very important – e.g. Water Aid prefer ‘policy influencing’ – more positive connotations. (Although this doesn’t change attitudes towards ‘advocacy’.)
- Qu: How to ensure campaigns are based on real evidence & aptly represent communities?
- Ans: Range of ways of campaigning – but VIP agenda is set in South.
- Qu: How can a direct-service delivery org. learn new skills to use in advocacy/ policy intervention; learn about entry points; budgeting; influencing ALL parts of policy making (e.g. monitoring & evaluation too)?
- Ans: Policy influence is no longer just for intellectuals – need to increase capacity for grass-level orgs to get involved.
- Qu: How to determine ‘best practise’ (& for whom) & where an org stands on matters?
- Janice Giffen (INTRAC): Slightly different model – already 10yr programme in Asia: Courses for NGOs, who then undertook research on own experiences & attended conferences at the end to share ideas. Boosted morale and informed gov. & media of NGOs work. (Unfortunately no real follow up at the mo.)
- ODI are trying to take up these ideas & create toolkits to inspire others.
- Qu: Is in-house E.B.R done on a specific area more effective than tailoring others’ research to your needs?
- Ans: Depends! Few organisations have the capacity to do everything & even if so credibility in eyes of policy-makers is still crucial (smaller orgs seen as less credible than Oxfam for e.g.) Hopefully ODI toolkit will be more (cost) effective for these orgs than trying to build huge in-house research capacity. Communication of evidence is more important – not a question of a lack of research. So long as CSOs involved right from

early stages of research to ensure it's apt & present it in simple, clear, usable way. (John refers back to Analytical & Practical Framework diagram).

John Young concluded the first part of the meeting by introducing the main elements of Phase 2 of the programme (see presentation slides 34-36).

Part 2: Building Networks for Capacity development

Naved Chowdhury opened this session with a presentation about how ODI is planning to build a network of organisations which can help CSOs use research-based evidence to influence policy (see presentation slides 38-42)

- Qu: VSO often get asked for one-off training – how to go about it?
- Ans: Combining general toolkit (for bridging research-policy) & local partners experiences to set it in context – Theory & Practise. Toolkits are just the beginning – forums to share ideas too.
- Qu: Who do 'networks' include?
- Ans: Different levels of 'membership' as explained by Naved - members/ collaborators/ partners.
- Qu: How to measure impact/ indicators to show if network has achieved its objectives?
- Ans: Difficult if not measurable variables (specific projects). Don't know for sure yet – holding internal workshop next weeks to discuss. Looking at if institutional capacity of partners has improved to influence policy-making (incl. if research IS impacting on policy). John suggested possible future workshop on monitoring/ evaluation– seemed popular.

Tom Bigg described IIED's RING. He explained the idea of the ring not having a centre and the ethos behind the Ring. He then went on to mention the members of the Ring and how the idea was for all members to trade ideas & experiences. He briefly mentioned the History of the Ring & how the first few years were spent building relationships with few visible results, but that this was very important for the network. Finally he explained that the last few pages of the handout were results from a recent survey about the functions of the Ring, although he did not go into detail for lack of time. (see www.ring-alliance.org for more information).

Janice Giffen described INTRAC's PRAXIS Programme. The network currently has 8 or so 'learning groups', in Malawi, Cambodia etc, each focusing on specific topics such as leadership & development, which share information through a "community of past & present partners". They generally start with a meeting to identify topics, then individual members prepare discussion papers (with INTRAC providing whatever support is needed), then they meet again to discuss the document and share experiences and write 'practice notes', which are shared on the website & used for online discussions (see www.intrac.org/pages/praxis.html for more information)

Subsequent discussion about how to build effective networks included the following points:

- Qu: Role of formal agreements between network members/ MOUs? (esp where funding is concerned)?
- Ans: Trust = very important – formal agreements can undermine this. But must take into account structure of ODI networks/ The Ring is very different – the Ring has no centre so MOU wouldn't fit. (Ring is an institution, ODI's networks = capacity-building programme). Idea of shared responsibility is important - 6/7 (John suggests 3/4) key partners incl. ODI? – all agree goals/ methods right from start. What about online registration to keep-track of members without official contracts? MOUs are popular with some partners (e.g. CIPPEC) but maybe their role would evolve over time to ensure it's mutually beneficial.

Although must be realistic too – need to pay bills! What if one core partner suffers serious difficulties (e.g. current situation in Zimbabwe) & is no longer in a position to contribute? – Put partner on hold/ focus on them/ continue relationship? Need to pre-determine answers in case situation arises.

- Funding? Needs to be joint so as not perceived to be donor-led agenda & to increase global strength, but in reality it's not easy for all members of network to raise equal funds (e.g. in Pakistan compared to UK). Focus on equal intelligence sharing instead?
- Name? Mustn't be 'ODI...' – issue of ownership.
- Will it always be global network or country networks too? (local funding)

Part 3: Other ways in which the programme could help

John Young asked participants if there is anything else the programme could do which would be useful:

- Future workshops (esp. on monitoring and evaluation)
- E-meetings
- Work on the role of the media in bridging research-policy (Panos)
- All attendees on emailing list, but it would be good to send info to their partners too.
- Focus more on how policy-influencing can affect a range of public service issues at once
- Focus on creating/ taking advantage of new platforms for policy-influence – sometimes 'space' isn't big enough to influence so need to create new 'spaces'.
- Very important for ODI to respect political/social/ cultural practises when engaging in policy-influencing. E.g.. Vietnam – can't talk about 'policy'. Similar issues in China etc.

Conclusion

John Young thanked all for their participation and time.

Appendix 1: Background and Programme

ODI has just come to the end of the first investigatory phase of its new six year Civil Society Partnerships Programme which aims to strengthen the capacity of CSOs to contribute to pro-poor national and international development policies through i) better understanding how CSOs can use evidence to influence policy; ii) strengthened regional capacity to support CSOs to do this; iii) better information on current development policy issues for CSOs; and iv) helping CSOs to participate more actively in Southern and Northern policy networks. Given the nature of ODI, the entry point has been through Think Tanks and Policy Research Institutes that are already working with other elements of Civil Society (see www.odi.org.uk/cspp for more information).

Work in the first phase focused on a) improving ODI's understanding of the CSOs that are involved in policy work; b) improving ODI's capacity to work with CSOs; c) "learning by doing" through small collaborative projects; d) contributing CSO perspectives meetings and seminars; and e) initiating a small number of larger collaborations with southern organisations on global policy issues. Substantial background research has been completed, a number of Working Papers have been published, and we have held consultative workshops with TTs and PRIs and other CSOs in fifteen countries worldwide.

Twenty representatives from organisations involved with the programme during the first phase attended a workshop at ODI late last year to help develop a plan for the next phase. They are keen to continue to work together to learn more about how to use research-based evidence more effectively, and the core element of the next phase will be build this enthusiasm into a thriving community of practice where members learn together and help each other.

The meeting will be in 2 parts. In the first part (starting with a sandwich lunch at 1.00) will share with you some of the lessons we have learned so far, and would be keen to hear about your own experiences of engaging with southern CSOs. In the second part (starting at about 4.00, after tea, and finishing with an informal drink or two), we would like to share our plans in a bit more detail and discuss with you opportunities for collaboration and/or synergy.

Programme

1.00 - 2.00: Informal sandwich lunch

2.00 - 4.00: How CSOs use research-based evidence - what we have learned so far

- Introduction to ODI's RAPID and Civil Society Partnerships Programme Phase 1 (John Young)
- How CSOs use research-based evidence (Julius Court)
- CSO capacity issues (Naved Chowdhury)
- Can CSOs effectively use research-based evidence to influence development policy/ (Discussion)
- ODI's plans for the CSPP Phase 2 (John Young)

4.00 - 4.30: Tea

4.30 - 6.00: Building Networks for Capacity development

- ODI's planned Network (Naved Chowdhury)
- Other's experiences of building networks (eg INTRAC's Praxis Programme and IIED's The Ring and others)
- Key issues for building successful networks (Discussion)
- ODI's "services" in this area (John Young)
- Could we do more? (Discussion)
- What next?

6.00 - 7.00: Informal drinks

Appendix 2: Participants and Contact Details

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