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point Civil Society Strengthening

Since the end of the Cold War and the reduction in the use of aid to support regimes according to their respective Cold War alliances, there has been a marked resurgence of interest in concepts such as governance, Civil Society, local democracy, accountability and transparency. Initially, NGOs were identified as the natural interlocutors for governmental and intergovernmental agencies wanting to promote Civil Society. However, in recent years many official agencies have recognised that NGOs alone are not synonymous with Civil Society. INTRAC has been keen to monitor and engage in the debate on appropriate and effective means of supporting Civil Society.

By the late 1990s, a new orthodoxy emerged which gave Civil Society a major role in development. Political scientists re-confirmed the role of Civil Society as a counterbalance to totalitarianism, whilst economists argued that Civil Society could ensure growth with greater equity. This led official agencies, private trusts, foundations and NGOs to support a range of programmes aimed at strengthening Civil Society. Indeed in some parts of the world the major source of external funding is now designated to Civil Society support, especially in the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe.

INTRAC has continued to research and assess activities related to the support of Civil Society. For example, we have analysed the link between local governments and NGOs and evaluated Civil Society programmes in countries such as India, Bangladesh, Nicaragua and Bolivia. At the moment INTRAC is commencing a new programme in conjunction with several agencies to review the link between theoretical approaches to Civil Society and their practical programme outcomes.

There is little evidence that the new Civil Society support programmes have been reviewed in any rigorous manner. Furthermore, are the many assumptions made about the positive impact of Civil Society on both development and political life valid? Does the rediscovery of the political element in development serve merely to undo the wrong approaches of the apolitical past or has it genuinely enabled poor people to gain a voice?

INTRAC will be exploring several cross-cutting themes:

- The nature of the State and its relation to Civil Society (whether the state is transitional, stable or engaged in internal conflict): previous studies have concluded that a weak State is not the ideal context for the emergence of a strong Civil Society. However, in many areas of the world Civil Society strengthening programmes have accompanied major transitions in the State.
- The theoretical approaches underpinning the practice of Civil Society strengthening programmes: there are considerable differences between the approaches of many donors. The greatest distinction is clearly between an 'American' approach, focusing on the formal aspects of democratisation (voting, political parties and interest group politics), and a 'European' approach that regards supporting Civil Society as a means of reducing poverty through better governance, accountability, transparency and providing a voice to poor people.
- The nature of Capacity Building in the context of Civil Society: many training programmes purport to support Civil Society, but in reality it is unclear whether they actually do so. Capacity Building has most commonly been interpreted as meaning training alone and other broader

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Also in this issue: details of INTRAC's Conference 'False Expectations? Reviewing the Thinking and Practice of Civil Society Building in International Development'; John Beauclerk reflects on challenges facing the development of Civil Society in South Eastern Europe and Rick James writes about the monitoring and evaluation of capacity building.

continued

approaches, that see Capacity Building as an organisation-wide intervention, continue to be neglected.

- How are Civil Society Strengthening Programmes being **monitored and evaluated**, if at all? Is much of what we all do based on simple acts of faith and unproven links? Can we really show that a strong Civil Society will lead to poverty reduction, or a more effective public sector? What has been the impact of Civil Society support programmes in transitional countries and what methods have been used to assess these impacts?

- What **Strategies and Methodologies** are being used to strengthen and support Civil Society? What are the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches and experiences? What factors have constrained or enhanced impact in different contexts?

This edition of **ontrac** explores further the concept and practice of Civil Society Strengthening. INTRAC plans to reflect upon progress made in relation to key aspects of the development of Civil Society in our forthcoming 10th Anniversary Conference: 'False Expectations? Reviewing the Thinking and Practice

of Civil Society Building in International Development'. At the Conference we hope to bring together INTRAC's wide network of Associates, NGOs in Northern, Eastern and Southern countries, academics, policy-makers, official aid agencies and private foundations in order to review progress and share experiences in this area. In preparation for December's Conference, we look forward to hearing from researchers, policy-makers and practitioners with their views on this subject and the questions it raises.

Written by **Brian Pratt**
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INTRAC's 10th Anniversary Conference

'False Expectations? Reviewing the Thinking and Practice of Civil Society Building in International Development'

INTRAC's 10th Anniversary International Conference will take place in Oxford between 13th and 15th December 2001 at Balliol College. The Conference will review the use and operationalisation of the concept of Civil Society and its strengthening in international development practice. INTRAC will provide overall reviews of current literature and practice, drawing on our own programme experience and research. In particular, we will incorporate our work on the relationships between Civil Society and the private sector, and also on the nature of Civil Society development in situations of conflict. The Conference will bring together the perspectives of both practitioners and academics in order to achieve a synergy between theory, programme and policy inputs.

For further information, please contact Carolyn Blaxall at INTRAC. Email: c.blaxall@intrac.org

Publications and Resources on Civil Society

INTRAC Publications

NGOS, CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE STATE

Building Democracy in Transitional Countries

Andrew Clayton (ed.)

NGOMPS No. 5, 1996, 277 pages, ISBN 1-897748-17-5, £17.95

This book presents papers by practitioners and researchers that examine the role of NGOs in Civil Society. It includes thematic papers on Civil Society, case studies from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe and also papers that analyse initiatives undertaken by Northern NGOs and donors.

GOVERNANCE, DEMOCRACY AND CONDITIONALITY:

What Role for NGOs?

Andrew Clayton (ed.)

NGOMPS No. 2, 1994, 136 pages, ISBN 1-897748-01-1, £9.95

The first publication to address the issue of good governance and conditionality from the perspective of both Northern and Southern NGOs, this book includes case studies covering a range of issues related to the role of NGOs in Civil Society, advocacy, legal reform and democracy movements.

NGOS AND GOVERNMENTS:

A Review of Current Practice for Southern and Eastern NGOs

Jon Bennett (ed.)

10th Anniversary Offer: reduced to £9.95 from £12.95

ICVAS No. 3, 1997, 184 pages, ISBN 1-897748-25-6,

This important book assesses the complexities involved in NGO – Government dialogue, particularly the issue of governance. NGOs have increasingly assumed a political function in challenging and redressing the status quo in favour of

people-centred approaches to development. The book includes a rich variety of case studies and contributions from authors in Central America, Africa, Russia, Eastern Europe, Central and South Asia.

For further information about these publications, please contact Linnea Ploen at INTRAC.

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Recommended Website

e-Civicus

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