

Maximising civil society impact

Partners in development...

While many UN agencies and donor governments are unsure about their motives for working with civil society organisations, there are positive lessons to be drawn from the Irish Government's approach of working with structures set up by civil society itself, argues Hans Zomer, Director of Dóchas.

In November 2002, the European Commission presented a 'Communication' to the EU Member States, setting out ways to increase the involvement of 'Non-State Actors' in EC Development policy-making. In the document, the European Commission acknowledged that, over the last decades, civil society organisations have increasingly become key partners in development policy.

UN agencies, donor governments and the World Bank all have mechanisms in place for working with NGOs and other civil society organisations. Whether explicitly or not, most donors and inter-governmental organisations see a positive role for civil society, either as deliverers of essential services, or as facilitators that can demand efficient public services and hold developing country governments accountable. Some donors also acknowledge a role for NGOs in influencing government policy and lobbying for change.

In recent years, most UN and donor organisations have begun to look critically at their engagement with NGOs, mainly in light of renewed emphasis on large-scale donor led programmes, often managed on the basis of public tendering procedures open to NGOs and for-profits alike. The donor community is thus in two minds about the role of civil society. On the one hand, it recognises that the development of an effective civil society with space for critical reflection and debate is crucial for

poverty reduction. On the other hand, the focus on effectiveness means that many UN agencies and donor governments see NGOs first and foremost as providers of services. In the words of former EU Commissioner Nielson, NGOs can either be 'contractors' or 'free birds' – contractors can bid for EU funding; free birds should rely on their own resources.

In reality, most governments' understanding of the role of civil society is less than black and white. They recognise the vital role of NGOs to (in the words of the World Bank) 'give voice to stakeholders – particularly poor and marginalised populations – and help ensure that their views are factored into policy and programme decisions'.

In Ireland, the Government has long recognised the added value of NGOs and this has translated into a number of measures, such as:

- The shaping of a strategic relationship with Dóchas, the national umbrella organisation of development NGOs;
- Strategic, multi-annual funding relationships with individual Irish NGOs;
- Support for NGO capacity building and training in Ireland; and
- The creation of an Advisory Board with NGO and private sector representation.

A central element in this strategy is the role played by structures set up by NGOs themselves – structures such as Dóchas. As a membership-driven organisation, Dóchas' role is first and foremost to stimulate co-operation among the Irish Development NGOs. Through Dóchas, the 34 members of the network exchange experiences and good practice, and formulate common responses to the challenges they face in their work.

To date, Dóchas has adopted two Codes of Conduct, and developed a series of guidelines on issues such as HIV/AIDS, gender and rights-based approaches to development. Dóchas acts as a focal point for information and dialogue on policy and practice in the Irish development NGO sector, and a catalyst for debate. By building strategic partnerships with government, academia and media, Dóchas fosters an enabling environment in which its member organisations can further develop their organisational and institutional capacities. By linking in with the CONCORD network, Dóchas ensures a flow of information and experience among the hundreds of development NGOs in the 25 member countries of the EU.

Dóchas' member organisations are committed to working with each other and with others, seeking collective strength, mutual learning and increased impact. And most critically, they do this in partnership with their government, so that the learning generated also informs Irish official development assistance. More than contractors or free birds, Irish NGOs see themselves as partners in development.



Hans Zomer
Director

**Dóchas, The Irish Association
of Non-Governmental
Development Organisations
12 Harcourt Street
Dublin 2
Republic of Ireland**

**Tel: +353 1 405 3801
Fax: +353 1 405 3802**

**anna@dochas.ie
www.dochas.ie**