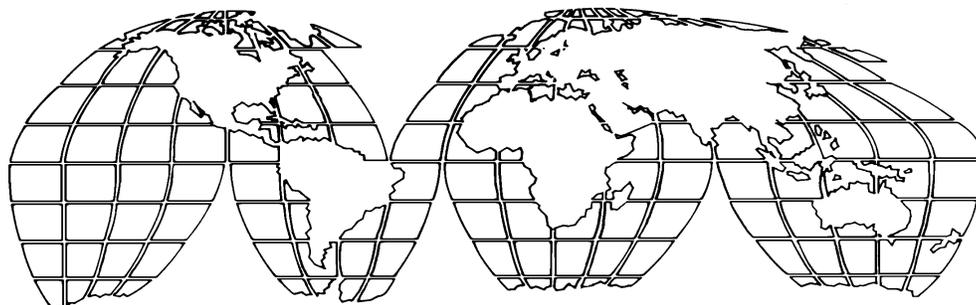

Constituencies for Reform: Strategic Approaches for Donor-Supported Civic Advocacy Programs



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Overview

By strengthening civic advocacy groups—nongovernmental organizations that champion governmental reform—donors can make a difference in countries moving toward democracy. Support for civil society is a core component of USAID's democracy and governance agenda. It reflects a growing realization of the value to democracy of autonomous centers of social and economic power.

A team from the Agency's Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE) recently undertook a five-country assessment of past and current investments in civil society. Countries studied were Bangladesh, Chile, El Salvador, Kenya, and Thailand. This assessment, the second in a series of inquiries into democracy, examines the role of civic advocacy groups in advancing good governance.

What Is Civil Society?

Civil society consists of nonstate organizations that are engaged in or have the potential for championing adoption and consolidation of democratic reforms. The study found these organizations can generate the public push for political reform, then work to consolidate reform by holding the state accountable for what it does. Such organizations include labor federa-

tions, business and professional associations, human rights and prodemocracy groups, environmental organizations, and policy think tanks.

These organizations perform a variety of roles. They

- Advocate on behalf of the public
- Analyze policy issues
- Mobilize constituencies in support of policy dialog
- Serve as watchdogs to ensure accountability in government functions
- Most important, act as agents of reform in strengthening and broadening democratic governance

The Role of Civil Society in Democratic Transitions

While in principle civic advocacy organizations can contribute to strengthening democratic governance, in practice their actual contributions varied considerably in the five countries. They played a preeminent role in some, but had little involvement in others.

What accounts for these differences? It appears that earlier experience with democracy is critical. Chile's long experience with a relatively advanced democratic political system provided a reservoir from which civil society

could draw in mobilizing people for a “no” vote against continuing the authoritarian regime of President Augusto Pinochet Ugarte in the 1988 plebiscite. Although Thailand’s experiences with democracy in the mid-1970s and late 1980s were more fleeting, they provided enough practical experience that activists from those earlier periods could work together in 1992 to spearhead a prodemocracy coalition.

By contrast, in Bangladesh, El Salvador, and Kenya, experiences during very limited democratic openings in the past provided inadequate groundwork for civil society roles in democratic transitions of the early 1990s. In Bangladesh, popular organizations were involved in the 1990 movement against dictator H.M. Ershad, but these groups were mainly student, professional, and labor organizations connected to opposition political parties. They do not conform with the commonplace definition of civil society as operating independently of political parties.

In El Salvador, efforts at civil society mobilization in the 1970s were largely autonomous of both parties and government. This was especially true for advocacy groups mobilized by the Catholic Church in the late 1970s and the Christian communities that promoted grassroots mobilization for social justice and political change. But in the 1980s these and other groups representing non-elites were the targets of death squads and government repression. They were in no position to influence the peace accords of 1992.

Finally, in Kenya, political freedom that existed after independence in 1963 was gradually swallowed up by a movement toward one-party rule that has lasted to the present. That leaves little room for civil society to organize in behalf of reform. Donor pressures to democratize the system did lead to a significant opening in 1991, but dissension among opposition parties and government manipulation of the 1992 parliamentary elections have inhibited progress in the democratic transition.

A Strategic Perspective on Civil Society

What insights can be gained from the five-country study and applied to donor strategies for supporting civil society? First, analysis of civil society and its facilitating role in democratic transition should be an integral part of donor planning for support of a political reform agenda. The agenda might include, for example, constitutional or electoral reforms to make the state more accountable and political parties more representative. Or it could address judicial reform to strengthen the protection of human rights. To revitalize the role of local governments, it might also emphasize decentralization.

At the strategic level the thrust of analysis is to identify how to advance host-country dialog on a reform agenda and on changing the fundamental rules of the political game to make it more democratic. At the tactical level it is important to identify public issues that can serve as a source of energy in driving the reform process. Frequently, issues emanating from particular sectors—for example, labor, women’s rights, the environment—can generate spillover effects in support of major political reforms. This has been the case with

the environmental movement in Thailand, which gained prominence by aligning itself with the prodemocratic campaign against military rule in the early 1990s.

One aspect of this approach is identifying constituencies that have interests in supporting public dialog and advocacy, particularly those that might share interests and provide a basis for coalition-building. In Bangladesh and Thailand, for example, labor unions and women’s organizations may over time, as industry grows, find much in common in advancing the cause of both unions and women’s rights. In both countries major industries primarily employ women laborers.

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Some constituencies are easier to organize than others. Labor and business may be able to mobilize constituents for collective action relatively easily. Other groups, such as small farmers, may find it difficult to organize to pursue their own interests, let alone a broad reform agenda. Likewise, some constituencies will be more inclined than others to reach beyond their narrow interests and press for fundamental democratic reforms.

In a particular context, actors in civil society will exhibit varied tendencies toward support of democratic reforms. Some may oppose or remain neutral toward reform efforts. For example, in resisting military rule, the business sector, religious institutions, or labor unions in some instances may move to the front lines, while in other cases they remain relatively neutral.

The art and craft of the democracy strategist, then, lies in building and supporting coalitions of associations that are proreform at a particular point along the democratic path. For donors, support will stress enhancing a range of organizational skills often lacking in civic advocacy organizations. In particular, improvements are usually needed in networking, advocacy, strategic planning, media relations, coalition building, resource mobilization, and policy analysis and dialog.

Strategic Sequencing: Initiating and Consolidating Reform

The case studies indicate that opportunities for civil society to organize and press for reform are conditioned by where a country is in the transition to democracy. To determine how they can tailor their support for civil society, it is important for donors to understand the dynamics of transition. Study findings suggest democratic transitions can be divided into four phases: pretransition, early transition, late transition, and consolidation.

Pretransition

In this phase, civil society generally operates in an environment of government repression and hostility toward political reform. Rights of association and assembly are severely constrained, and civic advocacy organizations may be subject to government harassment or worse. But there may be enclaves—religious institutions, NGOs, universities—that provide a limited space where civic advocacy organizations and their leaders can take refuge and build a network of reform constituencies.

Donor strategies under these constraints should include several elements. First is preservation of existing civil society resources. Donors may need to support safe havens where reform groups take refuge and internally exiled reformers can find employment, protection, and legal aid in the face of government persecution.

In Chile, the Ford and Inter-American Foundations, Canada's International Development Research Centre, and European donors provided financial support to civic advocacy organizations that sheltered and employed social scientists and political activists under censure by the Pinochet regime.

The second task is defending the autonomy of civil society in general. Authoritarian governments are aware that nongovernmental organizations often shelter reformist elements, and they may seek to weaken and control these organizations. If so, it is vital that donors support the reformist community in resisting government intrusion. And donors must support the organizations in negotiating a governance regime that empowers them to regulate themselves rather than submit to oppressive government oversight.

A third task is cultivating a dialog within the reformist community to develop coalitions, consensus on action agendas, and strategies for political reform. The Chile case illustrates how civic advocacy organizations created neutral forums and study circles in which leaders of op-

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posing factions could work together. They succeeded in dispelling distrust and in finding common ground as they prepared for the early transition phase.

Early Transition

This phase begins with a political opening in which an authoritarian regime concedes in some demonstrable way that legitimate rule requires popular consent, and rival political elites seek a consensus for a more open political system. Free elections are held and constitutional reforms adopted that provide the legal basis for a new order. Most countries where USAID has programs are in the early transition phase, a critical time for laying foundations for a new democratic order.

Regime acceptance of political liberalization opens opportunities for civic advocacy organizations to educate the public and mobilize support for fundamental reforms. However, these organizations must act with vigor and speed, as events often move rapidly in the early transition phase. This is most evident with respect to elections, where civic advocacy organizations may need to initiate a range of labor-intensive voter education and registration programs. They may also monitor or even participate in election administration.

In Chile, seven elections took place in a five-year span. All were crucial in laying the foundations for restoring democratic governance. Several civic advocacy organizations, including the Crusade for Citizen Participation and its successor organization, Participa, (both recipients of USAID support) organized massive voter registration and education campaigns. They also trained more than 5,000 electoral officials and political party representatives working in voting centers. These activities contributed significantly to Chile's peaceful democratic transition.

Aside from labor-intensive activities during elections, a task of the early transition phase is building a network of support for fundamental political reform that reaches beyond the small cadre of activist organizations that survived state repression earlier. Promising allies include labor and women's organizations, student unions, and professional associations. They may be found at both local and national levels.

Mobilizing groups behind a shared reform agenda provides the kind of public visibility and weight needed in negotiations with government. In Thailand, for example, the People's Constitutional Assembly, organized by a group of reform organizations in 1992, hammered out a unified platform. Some elements of it were later reflected in the government's proposed constitutional amendments.

A third task for the early transition phase is creating a favorable enabling environment for growth, autonomy, and effective social action in civil society. Often, authoritarian controls have undermined the institutional mechanisms and arenas that enable civil society to engage the public and the state. Thus, in the early transition phase, donors should attend to enhancing the autonomy of the media and universities, revitalizing the judicial system and municipal councils, and introducing mechanisms (recall, referenda, public hearings, right to petition) enabling civic advocacy organizations to represent the cause of reform.

These tasks are distinct from those of the pretransition phase, and many civic advocacy organizations are unprepared to undertake them. The donor's role can be particularly useful in the early transition phase, whether it is a brief interlude or a protracted period when elite factions negotiate a more gradual process of political liberalization.

Donors can 1) provide technical and financial assistance to civic advocacy organizations involved in voter education, registration, and election monitoring efforts; 2) facilitate public dialog by funding nonpartisan civic advocacy organizations that provide a neutral ground where opposing elites come together to discuss political reform; 3) facilitate this debate by enhancing the capacities of think tanks, the media, and other activist organizations in analyzing and proposing alternative reform agendas.

Late Transition

At this stage a fundamental redirection of a more open political system is under way. New rules for democratic governance have been agreed on in the early transition phase, and the main task is ensuring that political actors and governance institutions conform to them.

Civic advocacy organizations play a particularly important role in the late transition phase. One of their major tasks is civic education. This involves informing the general public about the rules and institutional features of the new political order, the means by which citizens can influence government, how they can seek redress against arbitrary government actions, and how to take advantage of new opportunities in community empowerment and governance. Civic education should create and strengthen public expectations that hold government and political actors accountable to higher standards of behavior.

A second task is monitoring compliance with new rules for democratic governance. That will help ensure that where noncompliance is discovered, the rules are enforced. Lack of enforcement is all too common in developing countries; civic advocacy organizations can help by assuming a watchdog role in discovering and publicizing infractions by actors both within government and without.

A third task involves building government–civil society partnerships. In Thailand and Chile, for example, business associations have supported governance reforms by financing improvements and streamlining procedures in public agencies that service the business sector.

Donor strategies in the late transition phase include providing technical assistance to civic advocacy organizations engaged in civic education and monitoring. They also include facilitating more partnerships with government agencies. In addition, donors can target assistance to civic advocacy organizations that champion the cause of sectors that remain on the margins of the political arena (labor, women, disadvantaged ethnic groups, for example).

Consolidation

In this phase, systemic and operational rules have essentially been agreed on, and mecha-

nisms to ensure political participation and government accountability are in place. This phase features a deepening of democratic governance within the culture and institutions of society. It signals a growing capacity of society and government to adapt to change and carry out reforms.

An underlying issue is sustainability of civic advocacy organizations—in particular, public interest organizations—as actors in monitoring rule enforcement and mobilizing citizens and communities to support reform agendas. Public interest organizations that advocate reform and address issues of the larger public good are needed for society to engage in effective problem-solving. They take up issues that may not be addressed if left to individual initiatives, largely

because the costs for the individual to engage in activist initiatives typically outweigh individual benefits to be accrued. In this regard, unless society establishes financial incentives (usually through tax policies) to support these organizations, it is unlikely advocacy organizations will contribute much to societal problem-solving.

Ideally, financial sustainability should be addressed in the late

transition phase, after more basic political issues have been resolved. But many donors are terminating their assistance in the early transition period (as in Thailand and El Salvador), without devoting sufficient attention to creating a favorable enabling environment for growth and sustainability of civil society.

In the countries studied, few if any government incentives or tax write-offs exist for corporate or individual contributions to public interest organizations. Nor are most public interest associations in the habit of seeking funding from the corporate world or from the general public. Donors need to devote more attention to creating a supportive policy environment and building bridges between public interest organizations and in-country funding sources.

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Recommendations

The four-phase transition scheme may seem to imply a linear progression to a democratic nirvana, but in fact the process is uneven, messy, and subject to setbacks. Indeed, many transitions may lead to some new hybrid form of authoritarian rule, and what initially appears to be a democratic transition may turn out to be a false start. Given the nonlinear nature of change, the sequencing of donor activities in each phase must be flexibly managed to cope with unanticipated obstacles or seize new opportunities.

Nonetheless, the scheme provides a basis for advancing the following recommendations on donor investments:

1. *Donors need to follow a disciplined approach in ensuring that investments in civil society do not lose their focus and relevance to the reform process.* There is a risk investments in civil society will be dissipated over a wide range of activities, yielding minimal results. Study findings suggest support for civil society should be viewed less as an end in itself and more as a means for advancing a reform agenda aimed at greater democratic governance. Investments in civil society should aim at attaining structural reforms in the polity, sequenced according to the transition phase under way in the particular country.

2. *Donors need to be prepared to exercise considerable leverage when supporting civic advocacy organizations engaged in fostering democratic transitions in the pre- and early-transition phases.* Many political reforms undertaken in the case countries likely would not have made as much headway without donor pressure and support. This was the case in Kenya, where bilateral and multilateral donors pressured the government to undertake political reforms in 1992. In Chile and El Salvador, without diplomatic pressure on the host country government, there would have been little progress in protection of human rights.

During the pre- and early-transition phases, civic advocacy organizations often are not strong enough to promote reform processes alone. In such situations, the added weight of donor partners (for example, through use of conditionality to press for political liberalization) may well be critical to reform efforts. Donor support may also be critical to the survival of

activist organizations. In the pre- and early-transition phases, they operate in high-risk environments in which they are vulnerable to government attack.

3. *Donors need to exercise caution when investing in institution-building efforts in civil society during the early phases of democratic transitions.* Many civic advocacy organizations are small, often with only a few staff members, and directed by a charismatic leader. There may be little internal democracy or leadership turnover, and linkages to potential coalition partners or constituencies may be tenuous. Most are not membership organizations. Because of their fragile base, in the early transition phase many of these organizations will either cease to exist as their leaders move into government positions or they will be submerged within resurgent political parties.

Given the precarious nature of many civic advocacy organizations in the pre- and early-transition period, donors need to exercise caution before investing major resources in any particular organization. There will be exceptions, but institution-building efforts directed at enhanced organizational capacities, greater internal democracy, and broader coalitions and constituencies may need to await some passage of time to determine which organizations are prepared to engage seriously in such changes.

4. *Donors need to devote significant attention to building a favorable policy environment for the growth of civil society, particularly with respect to expanding in-country funding sources for this sector.* Most civil society organizations depend in great part on donor financing. Needed are strategies to promote financial independence and sustainability. Creating an in-country enabling environment for individual and corporate contributions to public interest organizations (for example, by changing tax laws) is one such strategy. Another, in which USAID has pioneered, is providing funds for host country endowments and foundations.

It helps to be creative. In Thailand, for example, the Asia Foundation is helping establish a “green” mutual fund to invest in Thai companies that observe environmental standards. Part of fund earnings will be earmarked for environmental causes, including civic advocacy organizations within Thailand’s environmental movement. The mutual fund neatly joins an in-

centive for private profit with support for public interest organizations.

5. *Donors need to be aware of potential trade-offs in countries undergoing political transitions while also engaging in fundamental economic reforms in the move from statist to free-market economies.* Many countries are undergoing significant economic and political reforms simultaneously, although often at different speeds. In these situations donors need to calculate whether vigorous pursuit of reforms in one sector is likely to destabilize and undermine commitment to progress in the other. This is particularly the case with investments in civil society, which for the most part are designed to mobilize public pressure for political reform.

When a ruling coalition demonstrates genuine commitment to painful economic reforms, it may be most appropriate to complement this effort by supporting civil society organizations that can help champion and consolidate these reforms. Although such an approach may delay addressing systemic political reforms, as this report suggests, economic reforms can contribute to development of an autonomous commercial sector—which (if organized collectively) can advocate and advance the cause of good governance. Conversely, care should be taken in

pressing for painful economic reforms when a fragile ruling coalition is seeking to introduce fundamental political reforms.

6. *To defend against premature termination, donors should develop policy guidance that establishes criteria for a country to graduate from receiving democracy aid.* Some countries are moving rapidly toward self-sustaining economic growth. In contemporary donor thinking, that often justifies the diminution or termination of development assistance, even though many of these countries are still in the early phases of democratic transition. The potential for political regression and instability will persist in the early transition phase; it can undermine investor confidence and hard-won economic gains. In brief, it may make sense to continue support for democracy efforts even though economic development programs are terminated.

Given the generally low costs of democracy programs, gains from such investments may yield sizable benefits from both a political and economic perspective. Justification of democracy programs in all stages of transition can be strengthened if donors clearly outline the rationale and criteria for such programs and their eventual graduation.

This Evaluation Highlights, by Gary Hansen of USAID's Center for Democracy and Governance, summarizes the findings of the study Constituencies for Reform: Strategic Approaches for Donor-Supported Civic Advocacy Programs, CDIE Program and Operations Assessment Report No. 12, by Gary Hansen. The synthesis report and this highlights can be ordered from the DISC, 1611 N. Kent Street, Suite 200, Arlington, VA 22209-2111; telephone (703) 351-4006; fax (703) 351-4039; Internet docorder@disc.mhs.compuserve.com. Editorial and production services provided by Conwal, Inc.

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