Civil society dynamics
Shaping roles, navigating contexts

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are embedded within particular contexts and relationships which they navigate to shape their roles. In our research project, we explore the implications of this for CSOs' role as 'voices of the people' that can contribute to inclusive development. We zoom in on three key dimensions of this question. Each of these is fundamental to civil society's role: collaboration, representation and state-CSO interactions. From these three angles, our project advances an understanding of CSOs' role as relational, dynamic and contextualized.

The puzzle guiding this research project has been: How to facilitate a greater leading role for Southern CSOs in collaborations with Northern CSOs and donors? Our research findings indicate that this requires what we call 'Starting from the South': acknowledging and linking up with existing civil society and its dynamics in a specific Southern context. This requires starting out from a deep analysis of country contexts and diverse roles that CSOs have and seek there, at different levels, as well as analysis of the ways in which what collaboration can help whom, to what end.

Collaboration
Many studies on CSO collaboration show how power differences constrict the voice of the less powerful 'partners' and impose understandings and approaches. How can more justice be done to diversity and the autonomy of different voices in collaboration? Our research looks at this by zooming in on complementarities and capacity building partnerships. Our findings on these fronts provide starting points for rethinking CSO collaborations.

Representation

It is commonly accepted that CSOs represent groupings, perspectives and interests in society. However, in a context like India, this representation is not self-evident. CSOs are often made up of professionals who are not necessarily close to the people they represent. How do CSOs that seek to represent actually understand and give shape to that representation? And with what implications for 'inclusiveness'? We found that for many CSOs, their representative role is rooted in their 'otherness' – and this distance often makes a certain representative role possible for CSOs. At the same time, CSOs construct their legitimacy as deeply dependent on their relations with constituencies. Our research shows how CSOs reconcile these understandings in diverse ways, and reflects on how we can understand and assess their representation.

State-CSO interactions

The role of civil society for an important part depends on the space that the state gives to it. At the same time, state engagement with civil society takes diverse forms. The state and civil society can be interdependent and their relationship is also shaped by CSOs themselves. Penetration of bureaucratic governmentality and corporations into the civil society sphere present further complications. What do these conditions mean for our understanding of 'civic space' and how CSOs maneuver it? Our research shows how state-civil society relations should be understood as shaped in interplay, with room for different forms of context-specific strategizing on both sides, and teases out the implications of this for civil society and the question of how it can be supported.

About us

Our findings are based on fieldwork carried out in three Indian states (Gujarat, Bihar and Jharkhand) and in Delhi.

We are the Civil Society Research Collective (CSRC), a group of academic researchers connected with Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, Wageningen University & Research (Netherlands) and Lehigh University (USA).

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