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Building Responsive States: Citizen Action and National Policy Change

Citizen action plays a critical role in confronting poverty and social injustice at the national level. It can bring about significant changes to policy and help to build responsive and accountable states. The challenge is not only how best to support and enable national-level advocacy, but how to ensure the changes it brings about are sustainable. This *In Focus Policy Briefing* explores positive examples of citizen action and highlights how government, donors and civil society organisations can help citizens bring about pro-poor national policy change.

Introduction

The challenge of building responsive and accountable states which in turn will work to alleviate poverty, protect rights and tackle social injustice has dominated development thinking in recent years. Much of this work points towards improving the *institutions* of government – state agencies, parliaments and justice systems. Yet states are not built through institutions alone. Organised citizens also play a critical role, through articulating their voice, mobilising pressure for change, and monitoring government performance.

This *In Focus Policy Briefing* summarises the findings of a series of eight case studies commissioned by IDS on how citizens change national policies, and a discussion paper on civil society campaigning in Africa. It makes

Stand Up and Take Action

On 17–19 October 2008 in organised actions around the world, tens of millions of citizens united to ‘Stand Up and Take Action’ against poverty and inequality, catalysed by the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP), the UN Millennium Campaign, and others. Since the Make Poverty History Campaign in 2005, GCAP and other networks have continued to mobilise

to remind government leaders around the world of their commitments to ending poverty by the year 2015. Increasingly, international civil society organisations are also linking their global campaigns to national and local level advocacy, to address and change policies that perpetuate poverty and social injustice.

recommendations for how international aid organisations can support national level advocacy for pro-poor change and how civil society groups and campaigners can maximise the potential of their campaigns. It also argues that government actors must recognise and support the critical role of citizen action

if change is to be sustainable.

The case studies in this series affirm that change is possible, but requires intensive, long-term, organised, collective action to make it happen. The results can be significant.

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Successful change is possible

- In South Africa, the Treatment Action Campaign led to public recognition of HIV/AIDS issues, to over 60,000 people benefiting from publicly supplied anti-retroviral medicines
- In Mexico, a campaign to reduce maternal mortality put the issue of maternal health care on the national agenda in an unprecedented way, contributing to important changes in national budget priorities and health delivery mechanisms at the local level
- In Chile, an NGO-led campaign on child rights led to a new policy framework benefitting children, contributing to a decrease in child poverty
- In the Philippines, the National Campaign for Land Reform led to the redistribution of half of the country's farmland to three million poor households, contributing to their economic rights and livelihoods
- In India, a grassroots-inspired campaign led to the passage of the National Right to Information law in 2005, and further laws in nine Indian states, contributing to greater public accountability
- In Turkey, a campaign for women's rights led to a new Penal Code with 35 amendments for the protection of sexual rights
- In Morocco, the women's social movement led a successful campaign for reform of the *Moudawana*, the Islamic family law affecting women's rights
- In Brazil, the Right to the City campaign established a national framework for citizen participation in urban planning, critical to achieving housing and other social rights.

Certainly not all cases of civil society campaigning are as successful as these, as a related study by Robinson and Friedman finds¹. But these eight cases



Anti-poverty campaigners unite to march for debt relief at the 2007 World Social Forum

do offer important lessons for when and how organised citizen action can make a significant difference, especially for groups often facing discrimination, such as women, children, the urban poor or the landless.

Five Key Lessons

1. Building and protecting democratic space is critical

It is no accident that these successful cases of citizen action occurred in countries that have undergone a process of democratisation, offering new opportunities for organised engagement by civil society actors.

In some cases, such as the Philippines, a change of government led to the appointment of officials and civil servants with progressive tendencies; this widened the political spaces in which civil society could operate. In Chile, a new democratic government welcomed civil society organisations as partners in a process of collaborative policy reform. But while civil society organisations benefited from the widening of political space in these cases, in Chile, South Africa, the

Philippines and Mexico, civil society actors also helped shape new political opportunities, through their prior involvement in the broad struggle for democracy. Creating and maintaining the democratic space for citizens to organise and articulate their voices is a pre-requisite for effective policy change.

2. Civil society organisations rarely change policy by themselves

The cases demonstrate the critical importance of broad coalition building in achieving pro-poor change. Achieving the broader goals of civil society campaigns requires the capacity to operate at multiple levels; sometimes at different stages in a campaign, and sometimes simultaneously. In any one country a campaign may organise community-level sit-ins in the municipal square or the mayor's office, mobilise mass marches in provincial or national capital cities, reach out to the public through a wide variety of print and electronic media, and engage in behind the scenes negotiations on policy or programme implementation with elected officials or policy specialists. Few organisations can achieve this range of actions on their own: most must ally

¹ Robinson, M. and Friedman, S. (2008) 'Civil Society, Democratisation and Foreign Aid in Africa', *IDS Research Summary*, IDS: Brighton

“ Building cultures and constituencies for change can be as important in the long term as changes in government policies. ”

with others in diverse coalitions.

While many types of alliances are important, the cases point to the critical role of alliances by civil society actors with progressive figures within government, with legal scholars, academics, technocrats of professional associations who bring specialist knowledge to bear on policy debates, and with grassroots organisations and social movements.

3. Strategic framing of issues and messages is important, paying special attention to international norms as well as the national context

In virtually every one of these successful civil society campaigns, activists and campaigning organisations linked their struggle to international standards, laws and treaties – pointing to the enduring importance of international agreements such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights, which celebrates its 60th Anniversary this year. ‘Universal’ framing helps coalitions claim the moral high ground, and can also play an important role in alliance building.

However, in some cases activists preferred to downplay international norms, and stress national and local values. In Morocco, for instance, women activists successfully appealed to both universal standards and local cultural and religious values, using multiple

framing to appeal to diverse audiences including men.

4. Contentious issues require contentious politics

Important as framing may be, the character of the campaign may also depend on the nature of the issue. In the cases of maternal mortality in Mexico, child rights in Chile, and urban planning in Brazil there was little contention about the issue itself. The challenges were more over implementation and the campaigns had more of a technical and informational nature, led by professional NGOs at the national level and characterised by collaboration with state reformers.

In the cases of land redistribution in the Philippines, HIV/AIDS in South Africa, the right to information in India, or women’s rights in highly conservative environments of Turkey and Morocco, the issues were initially highly contentious, and evoked clear divisions of interests within society. Campaigns required a greater focus on collective action and popular mobilisation, as well as skilful use of high-profile media. They also often involved conflict and antagonism, rather than more comfortable ‘partnerships’ with government. This required strong relatively independent civil society actors who could challenge and hold their own against powerful interests.

5. Sustaining success: robust change requires robust campaigns

Increasingly donors and policymakers demand evidence of success against agreed indicators or measures. These case studies demonstrate that the meanings and depth of ‘success’ cannot be assumed or even predicted. For some, ‘success’ is defined by tangible victories in terms of policy language or programme implementation; for others it is seen in terms of more intangible outcomes such as building greater citizen awareness or stronger organisations for future campaigns. Building cultures and constituencies for change can be as important in the long term as changes in government policies.

Table 1 demonstrates the tangible and intangible indicators of campaign success. To be sustainable, campaigns should effect change at every level – from local to national, tangible and intangible. The better that national policy reforms are implemented, the more likely they are to translate into material improvements in people’s lives and to gain popular support. And the more that campaigns create the ‘intangible’ changes in decision-making patterns, accountability and rights-claiming capabilities, the more the policies themselves will be ‘owned’ and remain in place.

Table 1: Measuring Campaign ‘Success’

	TANGIBLE	INTANGIBLE
NATIONAL	Change of policy/legal system	New patterns of decision-making and participation
INTERMEDIATE	Better programme implementation	Greater government accountability and capability
LOCAL	Material improvement in quality of life	Sense of citizenship and capabilities to claim rights

“ Building responsive and accountable states without recognising and supporting the contributions of organised citizens to the process will do little to bring about sustainable change. ”

IMPLICATIONS

For donors:

While donors, especially international NGOs, may have provided some support, none of these successful cases of national change was externally-led or initiated. These successful cases involved broad-based coalitions – usually linking grassroots groups, social movements, government reformers, and the media. Yet, as the related study by Robinson and Friedman finds, donor aid often goes to urban-based middle-class NGOs, which lack strongly embedded civil society bases and may not be capable of mounting widespread coalitions for change. Moreover these changes have come about over long periods of time, with gains and reversals along the way, whereas much donor funding is short-term and linked to narrow measures of success.

Donors who are interested in supporting civil society-based action for national policy change would do well to:

- Broaden their understanding of civil society organisations and coalitions

which are able to bring about deep-seated reform

- Provide long-term support, including for building financial independence and organisational capacity for change over time
- Help create opportunities for civil society-based campaigns to build links with government reformers, media and technical expertise
- Promote the development of a supportive policy environment in which independent civil society organisations can to operate freely and challenge governments on contentious issues.

For civil society organisations:

The cases speak to the pivotal role played by nationally-initiated and led campaigns for policy changes that protect rights and contribute to overcoming poverty. Campaigners need to:

- Be alert to opportunities offered by changes in democratic structures and spaces, while being flexible and capable of adapting strategy to a constantly changing political context

- Create a web of alliances, including with state reformers and unanticipated bedfellows, but be prepared to back this with pressure if necessary
- Be strategic in the framing of the issues, depending on the audience and the national context
- Recognise that grassroots mobilisation and inclusion take time but are important for sustainability of the gain
- Think about how international pressure opens and closes space for national and local action, without assuming that the best campaigns for national change will be internationally led or linked
- Be committed for the long haul.

For governments:

These cases point to the fundamental importance of citizen action for changing national policies to alleviate poverty and achieve rights. Building responsive and accountable states without recognising and supporting the contributions of organised citizens to the process will do little to bring about sustainable change.

Further Reading

A series of IDS Research Summaries accompanies this *In Focus Policy Briefing*. These Research Summaries, and the original case studies on which they are based, can be read online at www.ids.ac.uk/go/citizens

Credits

This *In Focus Policy Briefing* was written by John Gaventa, IDS Research Fellow, with assistance from Ruth Mayne, Independent Consultant, Gary Hawes, Associate Director, International Budget Partnership, Rosemary McGee, IDS Research Fellow, and edited by Carol Smithyes.

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