

# Knowledge Programme Civil Society Building

## Programme Plan (2008-2010)

### *Summary*



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## **1. Introduction**

Academic-practitioner collaboration has enormous potential. The academic world can help provide a platform for learning and improving the analytical capacities of NGOs. Working with NGOs gives the academic world access to practical expertise and an opportunity to test ideas and theories or gather case material.

In 2004, Hivos and the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) launched such a collaborative project to set up a Knowledge Network focused on the theme of civil society strengthening in developing countries. At the core of this collaboration between Hivos and ISS is the interaction between practitioners and researchers to facilitate stronger knowledge sharing.

The next phase of the Civil Society Building (CSB) Knowledge Programme (2008-2010) will further develop new and existing knowledge and experiences, and to contribute to the debates on the main challenges facing the international development sector.

The CSB Knowledge Programme has research, outreach and capacity-building components. The focus is on fundamental questions and themes related to the dynamics of civil society formation; the role of external actors in strengthening civil society; and the contribution of civil society building to structural changes in the unequal balance of power.

## **2. Objectives**

The main aim of the Knowledge Programme is to better understand civil society formation and improve the contribution of civil society building efforts to structural changes in the unequal balance of power resources in society.

The three specific objectives of the Programme are:

1. To foster new and innovative research on civil society building in the academic and development sectors.
2. To improve policy and programmes aimed at strengthening the ability of civil society organisations to bring about changes in favour of vulnerable and marginalised groups.
3. To intensify the links between practitioners and researchers in order to stimulate dialogue and debate on civil society building.

## **3. Identification of main actors**

The programme envisages the creation of a network of key institutes and experts in which Hivos and ISS will take a leading and coordinating role. A range of strategic partners will collaborate with the Programme depending on the specific research and dissemination activities that are undertaken. The following groups have been identified as the main actors for the Knowledge Programme:

- Development sector.

A larger network of development organisations will be formed through the programme activities. These organisations will be able to tap into the knowledge produced and disseminated by the programme, as well as contribute their own experiences and insights.

- Civil society in the south.  
The programme aims to contribute to the availability of knowledge on civil society building, not only to improve the policies and programmes of international NGOs, but also to contribute to the capacity of local NGO and grassroots organisations in the South. The programme will not be limited to Hivos partners, but actively seeks to involve a wide range of civil society organisations.
- Academic world and knowledge centres.  
The knowledge that is generated by this programme will stimulate thinking and enrich other academic research, furthering current debates and theories on civil society building. It is intended that academics from the North and South will cooperate closely in the research through collaborative work with a number of respected knowledge centres. These centres will also form the core of the knowledge programme, with particular expertise in a sector, theme or region.

Regional consultative workshops are planned at the start of the research activities. The purpose will be to sharpen the identified issues, to discuss potential problems and strategies in particular contexts and the recommended approaches, to set up a network for the exchange of information and ideas, and to discuss the most useful outputs of the Knowledge Programme.

These workshops will also serve to identify key players in the region such as Hivos regional offices and partners, other international and local NGOs, donors, research centres (in the North and South) and individual researchers and consultants. These partners will be detailed in the annual plans for the Knowledge Programme. An initial mapping undertaken of a number of development and research organisations and their knowledge activities will be expanded to identify the knowledge gaps in the area of civil society building and opportunities for cooperation.

#### 4. Main research questions

Three overall research questions have been identified:

1. How can we understand the *dynamics of civil society formation* and the role of local actors in this process?
2. How do *external actors* contribute to this process?
3. How does civil society building as a process contribute to *structural changes* in the unequal balance of power in society?

Each of the three main research questions is further elaborated below.

##### 1. *Dynamics of civil society formation*

Civil society building is seen as an accumulation of historical processes, with both internal and external dimensions, that together determine the density, diversity and quality of civil society. We

can use the analogy of archaeological layers, in which each layer adds to the final characteristic of the civil society 'fabric'. Analysing and understanding civil society dynamics and formation thus implies disaggregating these layers and trying to understand the internal and external processes that affect civil society strength, even though we know these processes are always closely interrelated. Building on the 'mapping exercises' of the Civicus Civil Society Index, this research offers the possibility to study the dynamics and complexity of civil society, including various organisational forms, values, ideologies, formal or informal relationships and networks with other civic associations.

Another important aspect of this research is the analysis and understanding of how *gender inequalities* affect women's rights, participation and decision-making in civil society dynamics and formation. The research could look at why women's organisations often face difficulty in maximizing the impact of their work for the benefit of women, focusing on the interaction of the organisation with its constituency, as well as the organisation's role vis-à-vis the state.

The research will also look at notions of *authority and leadership*. What is the relationship between civil society associations and traditional or social leaders in various regions? To what extent can leaders represent the interests of the grassroots? How can traditional leaders realise sustainable social changes? Or do local leaders just confirm the status quo and inhibit emancipation processes?

## 2. *Role of external actors in civil society strengthening*

The research will address the question of whether endogenous processes of civil society formation can be effectively directed or supported by external processes. Under which conditions and to what extent can external actors play a positive, facilitating role? When attempts are made to fit external processes to local conditions, does it strengthen civil society formation or actually distort and undermine it? The majority of the interventions under the label 'civil society building' are actually focused on the strengthening of the partner organisations themselves. The research will explore the intervention logic of the civil society building strategies of a range of donors, NGOs and (local) support organisations by looking at both the explicit (formulated) and implicit (pursued) policies and strategies.

There are also a number of cross-cutting issues related to policies and programmes of external actors that will be covered by the research, such as innovation, gender, and sustainability.

The research could delve further into policy formulation around civil society building. Where do donors and (donor) NGOs detect its *innovations* in civil society building? What is really new and what are more 'traditional' or conventional policies? Are innovations related to themes or rather to particular groups or sectors of civil society? Are innovations found more frequently in some regions than in others?

In terms of *gender*, we could look at which priorities and interventions have been most relevant in different contexts for women's empowerment and equality in civil society. What have been the experiences with strengthening the legitimacy, capacity and outreach of the women's movements at national and local levels? Within the women's movement it has been identified that there are growing gaps between NGOs based in capital cities and grassroots initiatives in the urban slums and rural areas (Hivos policy, Gender, Women & Development 2006). The research could analyse how the external support focused on women's lobby and advocacy work for policy and law reform at the national level has affected the mobilisation and organisation around more local issues and knowledge. What alternative, more creative strategies could be used for support in

different contexts to women's civil society organisations (such as popular education, and broader alliance building with men and women active in other civic movements)?

The research could look at the dilemmas of creating *sustainability* for organisations involved in more political interventions, such as civil society building, in which there are often very few alternative ways of income-generation (e.g. human rights' groups or persecuted networks of social organisations). What happens to those organisations after donors withdraw, or will these groups remain dependent on external subsidies? What have been the important lessons from various donor NGOs regarding successful (and/or failed) policies to enhance financial sustainability? Are partner organisations at all able to work on contested or critical issues without external donor support? The research activities could include a number of ex-post evaluations of civil society building interventions where donors have left at least 5 years ago. Is it possible to detect the impact of the civil society building interventions? Is the result visible or at least still tangible? How do stakeholders look back on the intervention? What lessons were learned and which of those lessons were implemented?

### *3. Contribution to structural changes in unequal power balances*

After two decades of prioritising civil society building in donor policies and practice, it is important to rethink what it exactly has generated in terms of structural changes (both short and longer term) in the balance of power in society. After all, many current assumptions on the effects of civil society building urgently need some serious reflection. Have civil society organisations genuinely opened up spaces of participation for excluded groups? How have civil society organisations contributed to the inclusion of marginalised groups? Has empowerment led to improved living conditions or gender equality? Are membership organisations and/or social movements always the primary actors, or rather vanguard groups or NGOs? Is it always a bottom-up process, or does it also have a top-down component? This is an essential element to explore as the assumption is often made that civil society building should be bottom-up and grassroots-led. Can states also contribute to civil society formation? Or is it a matter of levels, meaning that national organisations always take the lead in civil society building over local ones?

## **5. Research themes**

The two main research themes that have been identified for the Knowledge Programme are:

- (a) Civic action for responsive governance, and
- (b) Social movements and citizenship.

These two themes are elaborated on below and will be worked out in more detail in annual activity plans. The case studies mentioned briefly below will also be further worked out in close consultation with the knowledge partners and independent local researchers in each region. The experiences of practitioners will be a critical source of information for the knowledge production activities in all of the case studies.

By ensuring some concentration of the regions in which the research takes place, we expect to be able to gather more in-depth information for comparative purposes. A selection has therefore been made where strong partnerships are already in place, or pilot research has taken place. This does not exclude other regions that can be represented through participation in networks, seminars, desk studies etc. The following regions have initially been selected:

- Andean region and Central America,
- East and Southern Africa, and

- South Asia and Indonesia.

*(a) Civic action for responsive governance<sup>1</sup>*

High hopes have been vested in the power of civic organisations to improve the governments' performance. "Civil society actors often find themselves having to play the important watchdog and accountability roles for states to implement and operationalise people-centred and friendly protocols, treaties, declarations and the like." (Mutasa, 2007:3) Shifting roles of civic organisations in the South may result from changing expectations by the international donor community of their major function in society, as champions in reaching the poor where governments fail, or as agents for advocacy to enhance democratic governance and a fair distribution of resources and services.

Civic organisations in the South operate at different levels of society with a variation of strategies. Service provision has been the traditional role at the local level, the best and long-standing example being faith-based groups working in fields of education and health care. Increasingly, organisations have been established as advocates of the poor to oversee government actions. They may analyse and monitor government spending, protest against irregularities like corruption, and advocate for better public services. At the national level, interest groups and development organisations have formed coalitions to advocate pro-policy and budgets, often with support from international development agencies. Initiatives have been taken in the context of the PRSP- and the MDG –frameworks, collaboration with national governments has been established to a lesser or larger degree. Frequently, such coalitions become involved in transnational networks of Northern and Southern NGOs, for joint lobby and advocacy efforts. They form the "so called 'global publics': domains within public opinion that transcend national boundaries, that are concerned with global issues and that exert a certain degree of pressure" (Koonings, 2007). Examples include Jubilee 2000, Live8 2005.

The focus in this research area will be on the instrumental role of civic organisations, as advocates for responsive governance. We address a basic formula for Northern support to civic organisations in the South, notably that through mobilization in organisations people can successfully advocate for a capable government in support of development and human security. The assumption is that strengthening civil society will increase the (political) participation of excluded groups and will help to spread the existing resources more equally. This is considered to work for individuals as they acquire greater capacity to improve their living conditions, as well as for society in a wider sense because of the counterweight formed to the power of the state and the market. Our research will primarily address the organisations at national and local level, but may be supplemented by investigation of transnational networks where relevant.

The research activities on 'Civic action for responsive governance' will focus on the three overall questions for this research plan. The first research question about the dynamics of organisation building will be studied by analysing how Southern civil society organisations are becoming more involved in policy development for effective poverty reduction, human rights and social justice. It will analyse the space available and the character of the engagement and it will question to what extent the mechanisms of involvement are authentic to the specific setting in which they operate. While in the North civil society has been engaged intensively with the state for a long period, in the South this kind of engagement is of recent time and of a more limited scope. This implies

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<sup>1</sup> We choose to use the term 'responsive governance' because it covers governance in the widest sense, including the enhancement of economic, personal, political and socio-economic abilities, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, gender equality, democratic governance and the rule of law, citizen protection and peace.

that “civil society has in the main been weak in its capacities and strategies for engagement”. Structures and mechanisms for the state-civil society interaction are often not in place or to a limited extent only. (Mutasa, 2007) What are the implications of this? Are civil society organisations able to be independent actors that frame their own agenda, or are they being drawn into an agenda of others (donor community, national or local governments)? Who benefits from the state – civil society engagements and actions? What are unintended consequences, e.g. how does it affect the role of representative bodies, such as parliament and political parties?

The second research question looks at the role of external support, taking as a starting point that support is a political act. By selecting partners, Northern NGOs enter into a relationship with the poor, which has an impact on the complexity of power structures and privileges. Besides considering the potential benefits of the support, it is also necessary to identify how it may be disturbing local processes? What are the channels through which support may be effective? How are choices being made? In the myriad of aid donors, are NGOs also moving towards more alignment and harmonisation, how?

The third research question will stem from the analysis under the first two research questions, with conclusions about the contribution of civic organisations to responsive governance in all its aspects, ranging from poverty eradication to human rights and social justice. We will analyse if the assumptions on which various strategies of support to Southern civil society organisations are based can stand the test. Are civic organisations as supported by Northern donors proper channels for social justice and prosperity? Do they provide the poor with a voice that is being heard and acted upon by the governments? What lessons can be drawn from the findings for the future collaboration between Northern and Southern NGOs?

Case studies to be examined will focus on national coalitions and locally-based civil society organisations established for poverty reduction and debt cancellation in a number of African countries (Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, and Mozambique) in Sri Lanka in Asia and in Bolivia or Honduras in Latin America. Other case studies will be concerned with the socio-legal measuring of civic intervention strategies to hold states accountable and protect human rights of vulnerable groups. The analysis will look at what is measurably effective in holding States accountable to legal norms by way of various national, regional and international legal enforcement mechanisms as well as certain social-enforcement mechanisms. The first case study will be in South Africa, to be followed by other countries.

### ***(b) Social movements and citizenship***

Some donors give a high priority to supporting social movements or their constituent organisations in developing countries in order to strengthen claim-making capacity in civil society. However, as we have seen in the earlier research on support to social movements, it is not easy to pin down what the most effective way is to provide support to these movements without undermining their own dynamics. Nor is it easy to determine the accumulated strength of a movement. It is generally accepted that social movements are a volatile (and often temporary) phenomena, which implies that it is of crucial importance to assess the particular state of development of the movement: are we looking at the early stage of rebellion, opposition, and contestation; or at a later stage of maturity and broadening support; or maybe at the point close to gradual disintegration?

The new research activities under this theme on social movements and citizenship will focus on the three fundamental questions posed in this programme. The first question related to the dynamics of social movements and will review how various movements emerged and evolved

and which dynamics and elements were central in the development stages from local membership organisations to coalitions and/or networks of various groups and organisations, towards broader issue movements. The important element here is to understand how the dynamics of this social clustering works, how advocacy or support NGOs operate in this process, how agendas are being set, how leaders respond to followers, which communication channels are preferred, etc. By choosing and comparing a number of recent social movement experiences, we can get a better understanding of this process of social movement formation in various contexts and regions.

The second question looks at the role of external support, in particular of donor NGOs. Support to social movements was one of the central points of attention in the Andean indigenous movements research project supported by Hivos, Ibis, SNV and Oxfam America (Bebbington & Biekart 2007). One of the findings of this study was the following: “The struggle over ideas is (...) an absolutely critical component of fostering more inclusive, rights-oriented development. It is also central not only to what social movements do, but to strengthening them – by elaborating well substantiated arguments around which they can coalesce and for which they can be identified as standing. This niche implies support for advocacy, but also support for research, press sensitization initiatives and a slew of activities aimed at increasing the visibility of key issues. It also implies strengthening indigenous organisations *as part of* broader indigenous movements.”(Ibid, 2007: 41).

These elements point at an important follow-up research agenda, in which the focus is on targeting advocacy, research and communication capacities, as well as the network-building capacities of individual membership organisations. The central concern is, as was outlined earlier, how to support social movement dynamics without distorting and undermining this. The assumption is that social movements have a particular optimum beyond which support is counterproductive. One challenge is to find out how to locate this optimal point, or at least how to make sure movements are supported in the phase of growth rather than in the degeneration phase. Another challenge is to examine which group, or level, or network within this movement dynamics is most effectively supported in order to positively contribute to the strengthening of a given social movement. Both internal (national) support as well as external (international) support will be examined.

Thirdly, the research will look at the implications of support to social movement activities for achieving a wider agenda of contributing to sustainable changes in power balances in favour of the most marginalised. The question here is whether civil society building strategies aimed at strengthening social movements are in the end really benefiting the poor and (socially and politically) excluded. Are social movements at all part of civil society, or rather part of a broader process of social change that also involves political and economic factors? If this is the case, is support to these movements an end in itself or a means to achieve wider goals of social transformation? And are these goals universal or context-specific?

The case studies to be examined will look at all regions. In Latin America, the focus will be on the indigenous movement in Central America (Guatemala and Mexico) and a deepening of the research as a follow-up to the study carried out in the first phase on the Andean indigenous movements. The women’s movement in Latin America will form the focus of another case study, in particular related to the struggle for the right to abortion, and the anti-free trade movements (such as the ‘*Tratados de Libre Comercio*’ (TLC) in the Central American region).

In Africa, the focus will be on democratisation movements (in Kenya, Zimbabwe and Malawi) and the emerging Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) movements (in East and Southern Africa, and later also in Latin America). In Southern Africa, another focus will be on the

movements around Hiv/Aids, building on the research work done on the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) during the pilot phase

In Asia, the case studies will focus on human rights movements (Indonesia), as well as on peace movements (Sri Lanka). In addition, other case studies will be done in various regions looking at community-based resistance groups (such as those against water privatisation) and other possible emerging movements.

The research on social movements will run parallel to a study on the history of social movements supported by Hivos over the last decade. This research activity is also indicated in the Hivos business plan 2007-2010 and is intended to get a better grip on this relatively unexplored area to take stock of relevant characteristics and trends in social movement support. This is also an opportunity to rethink and redefine how social movements are defined and categorised by donors, a learning effort which is integral to the new Knowledge Programme.

## 6. Activities and outputs

The activities, outputs and outcomes outlined in this section provide the basis for activity plans and the monitoring of the programme. The Knowledge Programme aims to contribute to a cycle of *knowledge integration*, including three important elements:

- (1) knowledge production (research and transformation of existing knowledge)
- (2) knowledge dissemination (outreach and capacity building)
- (3) knowledge application (utilisation for societal problem-solving).

The starting point of the Knowledge Programme will be the research activities undertaken by a range of different organisations and individuals, including ISS, Hivos and other regional knowledge partners. The research will be conducted at different levels with researchers from the North and South. Internships and scholarships will be offered at Hivos and partners, for (young) researchers to work within the framework of the research plan. ISS academic staff will work in collaboration with external consultants and researchers of key knowledge partners. Up to four research internships will be conducted by ISS Masters students each year. In addition, two PhD candidates could be identified, each working on one of the key themes of the Programme outlined in section 4 (civic action for responsive governance, and social movements and citizenship).

In addition to new research, another important element of the Knowledge Programme will be the *transformation of existing information* into more accessible forms for a range of audiences. A particular emphasis will be placed on gathering and sharing relevant information for civil society actors in the South.

In order to benefit from the research activities, a variety of different forms of knowledge dissemination and capacity-building will be developed. They include the following activities.

### *Network seminars*

A major tool of knowledge dissemination is the organisation of larger or smaller scale seminars bringing together relevant academics and professionals from the field working on a specific theme or dealing with a specific issue.

### *Publications*

Both academic and more professional types of publications will be produced in order to have a wide outreach. A number of scholarly contributions will attempt to link up research and practitioner discussions on development - creating the necessary linkages between policy debate and the more theoretical, academic world. Secondly, a regular publication of the results of thematic research can stimulate debate and thinking on the issues of the knowledge programme. Once a year, a contribution can be written on the basis of ongoing (or finalised) research of the programme. These contributions are targeted to reach professionals at NGOs and civil society organisations and aim to inform and share results of research focusing on a specific theme with national, regional or world-wide coverage. Distribution can occur physically as well as electronically. An Hivos e-journal can be used to distribute this series. Other publications include concise policy-focused reviews focused on a specific recent experiences or best practice in order to share experiences, from Hivos and its partners, other NGOs, or other organisations in the south working on the themes of the knowledge programme. Target groups include professionals and volunteers of grassroots organisations (GROs) and NGOs. Policy reviews can be distributed physically, but preferably electronically.

#### *Website*

Information about the progress of the research activities will be made available on the programme website. The website will include a discussion platform, open archive and mailing lists (contributors, members, visitors). An active knowledge-sharing website can be very useful in keeping a network alive and beneficial.

#### *Training*

Training courses aimed at participants from the South as well as the North will be part of the new knowledge programme 2008-2010. This could include a summer school at ISS in The Hague or at one of the partner institutes in various regions that bring together key professionals of NGOs and civil society organisations. The aim is to develop skills related to the research plan of the Knowledge Programme.

#### *Joint sessions between the key actors of the network*

Besides seminars and summer schools with a wider outreach, smaller-scale meetings (such as regional consultative workshops) could be organised to strengthen cooperation between core partners of the knowledge network. This could be organised twice a year in each region to share developments, on-going research and intermediate results, and keep the programme coherent. With the possible growth of the core partner network in the upcoming years, more attention should be paid to strengthening the ties between the growing numbers of network partners.

#### *International Conferences*

Different actors of the Knowledge Programme will also participate in international conferences, seminars and workshops during the three year programme to share the results of the research, gather feedback and identify new opportunities for collaboration.

Towards the end of the three year programme the Knowledge Programme will organise and host an international conference for around 100 participants. This will include researchers and knowledge partners from the North and South, students and teaching staff academic institutions related to development in the Netherlands, staff of development organisations and key policymakers. A limited number of participants from other regions will be supported financially to facilitate their participation.

#### *Bibliographic database*

This will compile the most relevant publications and grey material from various sources to support the on-going research activities of network members.

## **6. Outcomes**

The activities and outputs outlined above should lead to a number of outcomes in terms of knowledge application:

- The creation of a functioning network between key actors in the development sector, resulting in regular dialogue, knowledge sharing and utilisation. This basically means that proposed activities should result in a lively network with continuous or at least regular interaction between the different actors within the core network.
- Increased outreach and impact of knowledge programme's results, targeting the development sector, civil society organisations and the academic world. This refers to the outreach and impact that the knowledge programme will potentially have for a wider target group within the development sector.
- Increased capacities, understanding and learning possibilities within the development sector at large. Ultimately the preferred outcome would be that a wide range of organisations and individuals will have a better understanding and enhanced capacity to address societal problems related to civil society building within the sector.