

NEWS AND VIEWS . . . from ICSW

In previous News and Views I have outlined more generally the ICSW programme. In this edition I provide detail of our work to strengthen South members and link our North members with our South members.

A key to the successful engagement of civil society with government is to have strong national umbrella organizations. Governments have difficulties in understanding which organizations they should talk to when developing policy. In many instances they avoid complications by not talking to anyone outside government. Or they may limit their consultations to representatives of organizations with whom they feel comfortable. Inevitably neo-liberal governments feel comfortable talking to business interests. They do not feel comfortable talking to organizations that promote equality of opportunity and the concept of public services owned and run by the public sector.

ICSW has long held that civil society becomes a partner with government when it has a strong unified voice. Governments both like and dislike unity in civil society. They like the simplicity of having a single authoritative source for consultation. But they are troubled by the power of a unified voice when it is in disagreement with government policy.

Civil society has not risen to the challenge created by policies such as those promoted by the World Bank. The rising inequality caused by the privatization of public goods is one example of a policy that has swept across the developed and developing world. The response by civil society has been ineffective in ensuring continued access to services once provided by the state. Insufficient safeguards exist for low-income people to have affordable access to privatized or out-sourced services.

A national approach by civil society has more chance of influencing governments than a cacophony of voices that represent

sectional interests. The emphasis of ICSW's current global programme is to strengthen national umbrella organizations in the South. This is fundamental to achieving our goal of influencing governments to take seriously the road to reducing poverty in their countries and their regions.

To increase the abilities of our members to influence governments, ICSW is providing training for regional leaders. The first component is to introduce the leaders to the various models of poverty reduction, including the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs).

The second component is to identify the paths that national umbrella organizations can take to increase their credibility to participate in national poverty reduction processes. Subjects include: working with and establishing credibility with members; establishing credibility with governments and finding resources to operate. A handbook is being prepared for the use of national umbrella organizations.

On the subject of national umbrella organization credibility, ICSW officers met senior officials of one African country this year. We told them of the ICSW North-South project to strengthen national councils. The officials made the following points.

1. They see the importance of being able to work with credible civil-society organizations.
2. They look to collaboration and the building of trust with civil-society organizations.
3. Their government's policy is to regulate civil society but with a hands-off approach.
4. Their government has an interest in building the capacity of civil-society organizations.
5. They see problems with civil-society organizations relying on grants which then stop. They see a need for civil-society organizations to build self-reliance. Without self-reliance a civil-society organization cannot fulfil its umbrella function adequately.
6. The officials emphasized that it is important for civil-society umbrella organizations to have democratic structures, so that the government knows that the positions expressed by the organization have the support of the members.
7. Civil-society organizations need to avoid problems arising from perceiving overseas support as Father Christmas.
8. The officials noted that in any country there may be more than one organization claiming to be the umbrella civil-society organi-

zation. If this is the case, it is up to the umbrella organization to develop a working relationship with other organizations.

9. There is a role for civil-society organizations in promoting particular national policies, identifying priorities, influencing government budgets and monitoring PRSPs that are developed by the government. The government would expect to consult civil-society organizations in the development of PRSPs.

The third component of the training is developing methods to establish policy priorities and contribute to the government's budget process. This includes seeking to understand the relationship of the national budget to PRSPs. ICSW's Australian member, in cooperation with the Asian Development Bank, produced a handbook on influencing government budgets which was for civil society in the Pacific region. It is, however, applicable to all regions.

The fourth component is North–South cooperation. It is not unusual to find one of our South members has disappeared. Emails bounce and the phone is disconnected. Civil-society organizations in the South can be extremely fragile. They are victims of national turbulence and can be struggling to survive with little income. In an effort to create greater stability, ICSW is encouraging North members to twin with South members to provide continuous support. The trial project is with the Finnish National Committee of ICSW and the Tanzania Council of Social Development. Issues to be considered are the process of North–South cooperation; obtaining resources; contracts between partners; reporting and responsibility to donors; follow-up processes. Of major interest is how to make partnerships sustainable and results focused.

The North–South project is, as you might imagine, an ambitious programme. I am pleased to say that there are an increasing number of people, civil-society organizations and governments that recognize our vision as possible and indeed essential if civil society is to play a part in sustainable poverty reduction.

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