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After ten years as Executive Director of ICSW this is my last contribution to News and Views. I take this opportunity to reflect on the status of civil society which is in transition in all societies.

Governments have mixed feelings about civil society. Governments welcome the creation of services that behave like extensions of government. They do not welcome pressure to extend policies and budgets beyond those set by the governing party. If the representatives of civil society become too close to government they risk being perceived as tools of government by the people they claim to represent. If they are too critical they risk losing their policy influence with government. Civil society needs skills to manage the dynamics of working with governments.

The report of the 2011 Johannesburg conference titled: *Protecting democracy - reclaiming civil society space in Africa* (CCP-AU 2011) included many disturbing statements regarding civil society. “In environments of dictatorships, civil society practices self-censorship, is cowed to submission by repressive regimes and has become vulnerable to infiltration.” Panellists in one session “argued that the post-independence euphoria epitomised by close working relationships between civil society and governments, especially in service delivery, appears to be suffering a reversal. The downward spiral in civil society organisation-state relations became marked after the September 11 attacks. Governments started to systematically shrink the space that had been accorded to civil society arguing for the protection of human lives over that of human rights” (CCP-AU 2011:21).

While the quotations are about Africa I observe similar situations in many other regions of the world.

Jude Howell and colleagues at the London School of Economics have traced the path of civil society since the 1980s. They observed that: “It was dissident intellectuals in Eastern Europe who revitalized the concept of civil society in the 1980s to express their resistance to authoritarian rule and their aspirations for a more democratic polity with a continued role for state regulation. The concept of civil society soon became a rallying cry against oppressive regimes in Latin America, the Soviet Union and Africa” (Howell 2011).

The Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action (United Nations 1995) established a new consensus to place people at the centre of development. More recently the *Paris Declaration of 2005 on aid effectiveness* (OECD 2005), the *Accra Agenda for Action* (OECD 2008), and the *Busan Partnership for effective development co-operation* (OECD 2011), provided new directions for development assistance and cooperation. The Accra Agenda and the Busan Partnership incorporated an expanded role for NGOs in development assistance. The Paris Declaration, the Accra Agenda and the Busan Partnership proposed the concept of general budget support to give recipient country governments more scope to make decisions based on their own priorities. The principle is national ownership. The international agreements place more responsibility on governments to encourage and enable civil society input to policy and budget processes.

Strong national councils are imperative as a tool to influence government policy, government budgets and poverty reduction strategies. National councils are powerful agents for enhancing the work of civil society through their capacity to strengthen and support their local and national level member organisations.

A major obstacle to mobilising democratic institutions for poverty alleviation is the organisational weakness of people who live in poverty and disadvantage. ICSW works to strengthen the capacity of civil society to participate effectively in poverty reduction and social development programmes.

Mkandawire, the former director of the UN Research Institute for Social Development, outlined his perspectives on why we need to strengthen civil society in his paper: “*Disempowering new democracies and the persistence of poverty*” (Mkandawire 2006).

Private capital is strengthened in new democracies undergoing market-oriented reforms. Private capital “wields tremendous veto power over macroeconomic policies”. The consequence is a weakening of the “state’s capacity to regulate the economy and to mediate class and sectoral conflicts”. The state and business have established new deliberative mechanisms but the same cannot be said of the poor due to “their lack of institutionalised channels that service their needs” (Mkandawire 2006:18). Commercial rivals collaborate in business associations. Trade unions collaborate through national associations. Thus social organisations also need a mechanism for collective action.

The message of collaboration is not limited to developing countries and emerging economies. The global financial crises are continuing and bringing about fundamental changes to the social fabric of countries in crisis. I have observed in many established economies that the national councils have diminished in influence. They grew under social democratic regimes

but more recent neo-conservative administrations have shattered an unprepared civil society. Advocacy organisations in particular did not reconstruct in preparation for the decline of social democracy and were reliant on government subsidies. When these subsidies were withdrawn, the national councils imploded and became little more than committees.

Within developing countries and regions, civil society needs to establish formal relations with donors including foreign NGOs working in their country. Combined approaches have more chance of success than numerous approaches from disparate NGOs. There is a conundrum here. Indigenous NGOs are more often than not struggling to gain resources for their work. Their inclination is to get ahead of their colleague NGOs to be first in line for donor funds. This leads to the local NGOs adapting their mission and work to the view of the donor and as a result they fail to respond to local need.

ICSW seeks to strengthen the capacity of civil society, through its National Member Organisations, to achieve better outcomes and standards for vulnerable people who live in poverty and/or disadvantage all over the world. The strength of ICSW National Member Organisations is that they are umbrella organisations which themselves have many members. A national council brings together a wide variety of organisations across the whole service delivery and policy advocacy spectrum to work together to identify and advocate best practice and best policy in social welfare and social development. Such organisations are potentially an enormous force for improvement.

ICSW has designed and conducted training programmes to assist civil society leaders to become influential players in national and regional policy. Since 2009 this training has focussed on the implementation of social protection floors at national level.

The first step of a national council is to find the common values of the members of the national council. From that position they can move to developing policies and national priorities which can be conveyed to donors. This is a long-term approach and moves away from the short term opportunism of both donors and local NGOs.

Denys Correll
Executive Director ICSW

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