

Study of the impact of the work of FORUT in Sri Lanka: Building Civil Society

Summary



Background

This report from Sri Lanka is part of a study commissioned by the Evaluation Section of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs¹ in December 2002. The study examines how Norwegian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) contribute to strengthening civil society in developing countries and assesses the wider impact and the “value added” of their work, in particular with regard to poverty reduction, expansion of democracy and increased respect for human rights. Two Norwegian NGOs and two countries were selected for the study; Save the Children Norway in Ethiopia and FORUT in Sri Lanka.

The first report examines methodological issues related to impact assessment. The second report discusses the findings from the Sri Lanka country study. The third report, to be published in October 2004, discusses the findings from the Ethiopia country study. The final report, to be published in December 2004, is a synthesis report drawing on the findings from the two country studies and the inception report. The reports are available on www.norad.no (Evaluation).

The Sri Lanka study was designed as an in-depth study of FORUT and its partners in two districts, the war affected Vavuniya district in the North and in the politically turbulent Hambantota district in the South. A mix of methodologies was employed for the study: participatory workshops, a survey of FORUT’s partners and in-depth studies of selected partners. Field work was carried out between December 2002 and November 2003.

FORUT is the development organisation of the Norwegian temperance organisation and its youth organisation Juvente. FORUT’s Sri Lanka budget was Rs. 375 million (NOK 24.5 million/US\$ 3.6 million) in 2003, making it by far the largest FORUT country operation. FORUT’s work is funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Norad.

Study findings

The importance of context

The Sri Lanka study stresses the importance of contextual factors for assessing impact. The national as well as the local context in which the project interventions take place are important. Contextual factors identified by the study include: the size and power of different civil society organisations as well as their potential partner organisations; the space to operate allowed by the government as well as rebel groups; the need to respond to multiple and sometimes incompatible requests made by stakeholders; competition between NGOs over delivering the most marketable “package”; and the disruptive and destructive impact of disasters, both man-made and natural.

Strengthening civil society

Community based organisations (CBOs) flourish in rural areas in Sri Lanka, while numerous larger civil society organisations are active in the cities. FORUT’s approach and activities represent an effort to strengthen civil society in the rural areas from a “grassroots” perspective by initiating, empowering and strengthening local organisations through a community development approach. FORUT works with three categories of organisations:

- self-help groups of people who know each other as neighbours, relatives or friends (5-8 people)
- CBOs at the village level. Members of self-help groups come together to form village organisations or CBOs
- partner organisations/federations of several CBOs from a number of villages.

The formation of the groups has contributed to increased interaction and trust and a feeling of unity among members. These relationships are also strategically useful for the effective management of savings and credit programmes in the villages.

FORUT-supported CBOs offer an additional arena for collective action in the villages, which in turn has contributed to increased social cohesion and unity, as well as a more pleasant village environment. In southern Sri Lanka there are typically a number of village organisations present. Overlapping

1 The Evaluation Section was transferred from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Norad in February 2004.

memberships and collaboration between the CBOs suggest that FORUT-supported CBOs have become part of a wider network of village organisations.

In the conflict-affected areas, CBOs provide arenas for people to come together, rebuild lost relationships and regain mutual trust and confidence. There are fewer local organisations in the conflict-affected areas, and the potential for international NGOs to make a contribution towards rebuilding lives and organisations is significant. Yet, the space for civil society organisations to operate has become more restricted because the tradition of independent organisation has become weakened as a result of the war.

CBO members have a strong allegiance to their self-help groups and CBOs. This strong sense of belonging and ownership does not transfer to the next level of organisation, the federations, which were established with FORUT support to represent several CBOs. The federations operate more as conduits for channelling funds and other resources from donors to the individual CBOs than as advocates for their members. This means that organisational networks that go beyond the village level are weak.

Capacity building

NGOs are expected to perform well in terms of capacity-building or strengthening human resources. In line with this, FORUT's interventions in both Vavuniya and Hambantota have laid the foundation for building civil society organisations in local communities. FORUT has also provided training to build awareness and the capacities of CBO members and their leaders.

Yet, the current approach is inadequate in terms of achieving FORUT's ambitious policy objectives. These objectives are also in line with Norwegian guidelines for support to civil society regarding affecting changes in power structures and relationships. The study finds that:

- resources spent on capacity building have not been adequate
- capacity building efforts are not aligned with FORUT's overall objectives
- a series of organisational practices are in place that counteract the objectives of capacity building.

Poverty reduction

FORUT's interventions in the area of poverty reduction are threefold:

- savings and credit programmes implemented either through self-help groups or CBOs
- agricultural loans to farmers
- health, education and infrastructure services delivered to both poor and conflict-affected communities.

The combined impact of these interventions had been to reduce poverty among members of FORUT's partner organisations by increasing family incomes and providing a safety net in times of crisis.

Through its community development and social mobilisation work in poor areas, FORUT and its partners have been able to reach poor, remote and marginalised communities. Despite the fact that FORUT has provided these communities with a number of services, there are few examples of FORUT having provided them with links to other institutions of economic and political power.

Democratisation and good governance

The CBOs have not contributed to significant changes in the relationship between village communities and local governance institutions. Interactions between FORUT's partners and institutions of administrative and political power have been conducted through traditional modes of interaction. Requests made by CBOs have been for resources for the villages, typically small infrastructure projects. Nevertheless, the hand of some village communities had been strengthened by some successful CBOs.

By working closely with state institutions, FORUT and its partners have contributed to improved coverage in the provision of services and the adoption of new practices by state institutions. In this three-way relationship, under-funded government agencies have provided technical expertise, FORUT has contributed funding, and FORUT's partners have conducted needs assessments and mobilised people to participate in community development projects.

As for national policy advocacy, FORUT has played a role through its participation in the Consortium for Humanitarian Agencies, where FORUT has worked to improve humanitarian access to the war-affected populations. FORUT has been active in a London-based NGO forum on Sri Lanka involved in advocacy on human rights issues. Through its support for the Alcohol and Drug Information Centre (ADIC), FORUT has contributed to the public debate on alcohol and drug related issues.

Challenges for Norwegian NGOs' partner organisations

Financial sustainability

In response to the challenge of encouraging the financial sustainability of its partner organisations, FORUT has developed two strategies: diversification of its donor and income base. With respect to the first, FORUT's partners have been relatively successful in developing relationships with a range of donor agencies. Diversifying income has been a trickier task; non-donor income has only contributed marginally to FORUT's partners' finances.

The pull towards service delivery

There is a demand for service delivery from both the local communities as well as the government. The almost self-evident implication of the pull towards service delivery is that less attention, focus and resources are provided for the benefit of strengthening the social mobilisation and advocacy roles of civil society organisations. Consequently, FORUT and its partners are sandwiched between their own objectives and the guidelines of the Norwegian donor, on the one hand, and demands from the local contexts in which they work, on the other. To overcome the challenge of combining service delivery with advocacy or social mobilisation, the multiple demands coming from different stakeholders need to be comprehensively addressed, and priorities explicitly set.

The long implementation chain

Norwegian development policies are implemented through a long chain of actors after funding is allocated to a Norwegian NGO. For FORUT this chain starts at the Gjøvik head office, it continues to Colombo, then to FORUT's field offices, to local partner organisations, to CBOs that make up the local partner organisation and in some cases to small savings and credit groups in the villages made up of 5-8 people. With this set-up, a great deal of effort is needed to ensure compatibility between FORUT's objectives and the objectives of the local organisations, if the vision of FORUT, let alone the policy makers in Oslo, is to be achieved.

Conclusion

Although FORUT, unlike many international NGOs, takes a long term view to its engagement in local communities, capacity building efforts and partnership practices have not been designed to adequately strengthen partner organisations. Further, FORUT's partner organisations are primarily geared towards attracting resources to the villages and facilitating participatory service delivery for FORUT. FORUT has contributed to poverty reduction by increasing the incomes of members of FORUT's partner organisations. Even though the funds involved have been modest, they have often played a critical role in meeting household needs. FORUT has made less of an impact on governance and democratisation; despite the adoption of new institutional practices by government agencies as a result of collaboration with international NGOs and their Sri Lankan partners and improved access to governance institutions for marginal and vulnerable communities. Overall, the study raises complex questions about how, and under what conditions, Norwegian NGOs can play a role in facilitating change by enabling their partners to become change agents through engaging in advocacy and social mobilisation.

A report prepared by Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR) for the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad).

Norad

Direktoratet for utviklingssamarbeid
Norwegian Agency for
Development Cooperation
Pb. 8034 Dep 0030 OSLO
Ruseløkkvn. 26, Oslo, Norway

Tel: +47 22 24 20 30
Fax: +47 22 24 20 31
postmottak@norad.no
www.norad.no