

Study/1/2005



# **Study of the impact of the work of FORUT in Sri Lanka and Save the Children Norway in Ethiopia: Building Civil Society**

**Summary of synthesis report**





## Background

This is the fourth and final report resulting from a study commissioned by the Evaluation Section of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs<sup>1</sup> in 2002 to examine how Norwegian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) meet the expectations expressed in the government's guidelines for support to Norwegian NGOs. The study addresses the contribution that two Norwegian NGOs, Save the Children Norway (SC Norway) and FORUT, make in terms of strengthening civil society in two widely different country contexts; Ethiopia and Sri Lanka. Moreover, the study assesses the impact of the work of the two NGOs and their local partners in three areas: good governance and democratisation, respect for human rights and poverty reduction. The study also discusses the implications of the study findings on NGO reporting and considers the expectation that NGOs should act as change agents.

This final report is based on two country studies and an inception report addressing methodological issues. All four reports are available on [www.norad.no](http://www.norad.no) (Evaluation). The study has been undertaken by the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research in collaboration with Chr. Michelsen Institute.

SC Norway is one of the largest NGOs in Norway and part of the international Save the Children Alliance. SC Norway's budget in Ethiopia in 2003 amounted to approximately USD 3.5 million. FORUT is the development organisation of the Norwegian temperance organisation and its youth organisation, Juvente. FORUT's budget in Sri Lanka was USD 3.6 million in 2003, making it by far the largest FORUT country operation. While SC Norway's focus in Ethiopia has changed over the years, from a broad-based community approach to a child rights approach, FORUT has maintained its focus on community development. SC Norway's work is explicitly rights-based and grounded on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. FORUT's work is aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions of the poor, primarily in rural communities.

The Norwegian guidelines for support to the development work of Norwegian NGOs define civil society as the *"formal and informal networks that are active in the public sphere between the state and the family"*. Civil society is viewed as something concrete; including both formal and informal networks. This report draws on this definition in its focus on the organisations and networks that make up civil society. On the other hand, civil society is also often seen as an aspect of participation, democracy and good governance, providing a voice for the poor and an arena for strengthening their influence in the political process. This aspect refers to the value base of civil society organisations. A prominent idea in the guidelines is the notion of civil society organisations as change agents, promoting and contributing to democratisation, respect for human rights and poverty reduction.

## Study findings

### *The importance of context*

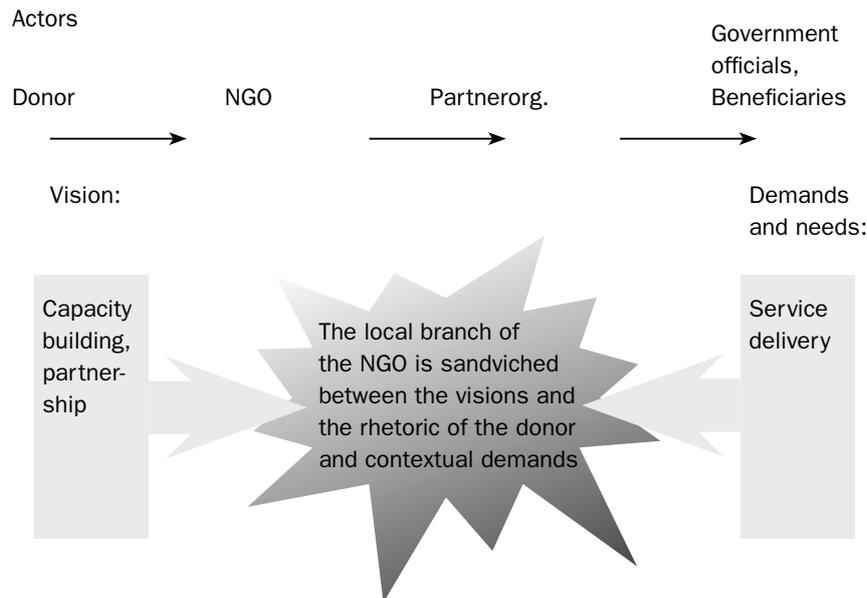
Civil society is weak in Ethiopia. Ethiopian NGOs hardly exist outside of the large cities. In Sri Lanka community based organisations flourish in the rural areas, and numerous civil society organisations are active in the cities. The critical role of the state, governance institutions and government policies in allowing space for civil society organisations is demonstrated in both of the country cases. The Ethiopian state is considerably more restrictive with respect to the space it allows international and national NGOs than the Sri Lankan state, which in general has allowed ample space for civil society organisations to operate. Other significant contextual factors are natural disasters and wars, which have had a devastating impact on the achievement of project objectives.

Moreover, the local context profoundly shapes the interventions of the partner organisations. At the grassroots level the demand for services to fill gaps is strong, from local governance institutions as well as from partners and beneficiaries. At the same time national governments, apprehensive of the advocacy role of civil society organisations, also push NGOs towards service delivery.

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1 The Evaluation Section was transferred from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) in February 2004.

### ***Sandwiched between the vision of donors and contextual demands***



The almost self-evident implication of the pull towards service delivery is that less attention and focus and fewer resources are provided for the benefit of strengthening the social mobilisation role and advocacy role of civil society organisations.

#### *Strengthening civil society and building capacity for change*

SC Norway relies heavily on state agencies as implementing partners because civil society organisations are largely absent outside Addis Ababa. FORUT's policy has been to form its own partner organisations. This study, in particular the Sri Lanka case, raises questions about the appropriateness and adequacy of ongoing capacity building efforts. Emphasis has been on building administrative capacity. Capacity building efforts have not been adequately linked to the activities that the organisation carries out, be it mobilisation, advocacy, service delivery or innovation. Efforts to build capacity need to be backed up by organisational practices that empower the partner organisations and that counteract a top-down approach. The study finds that in both cases, NGO partnerships are shaped by the interests and concerns of the Norwegian NGOs. On the other hand, the long implementation chain that the local partner becomes a part of also restricts the influence of the Norwegian NGO.

Membership in the partner organisations has led to *increase in awareness* about the issues that are of concern to the Norwegian NGOs. This was most notably found among the children who took part in child rights groups in Addis Ababa, but was also generally noted among members of successful partner organisations. Not only has awareness increased at an individual level, but members of the organisations also note an increased propensity to take part in collective activities of various kinds. This can be seen as one indication that values connected to membership in civil society organisations, such as *trust*, have been strengthened.

Interventions by NGOs and community based organisations (CBOs) are normally small-scale, scattered, low-cost, and squeezed between policy objectives of the donors and demands from local stakeholders and beneficiaries. It is symptomatic that the largest and most successful programme that the study assessed was not with a civil society partner, but a state partner. To strengthen civil society in order to affect the intended changes in socio-political structures and institutions, civil society organisations need to work with each other. However, thus far effective network and alliance building has proved illusive (with the exception of the Save the Children alliance).

#### *Poverty reduction*

FORUT's approach to poverty reduction can be analysed in terms of the impact of its micro-credit, loan and service delivery programmes. These programmes have had a positive impact on households in terms of the traditional notion of income related poverty; the incomes of successful participants have increased. Yet the inputs have been too small to allow people to escape from poverty traps. The programmes have also included groups that were previously marginalised and without access to resources, other than through traditional exploitative structures.

SC Norway's programmes have not had a focus on income poverty, yet the potential impact that the programmes have on the future prospects of the children enrolled in its education programmes is wide-ranging in terms of potential future earnings and access to resources (jobs, education etc.) and services. Despite the fact that income-related poverty is a vast problem in Ethiopia (80% of the population live on less than \$1 a day), SC Norway only spends a modest share of its budget, approximately 5%, on poverty reduction.

#### *Good governance and democratisation*

FORUT and SC Norway have contributed to good governance primarily through direct collaboration with government agencies on different projects and programmes, leading government agencies to adopt new policies and practices.

SC Norway has engaged in advocacy on the basis of its expert status and clear mandate in the field of children's rights. Its Ethiopian partners, on the other hand, feel more comfortable with a service delivery role that does not challenge the state, and have been involved in providing policy advice and training rather than more confrontational, campaign style advocacy.

During the war, FORUT found it increasingly difficult to balance an operational role with an advocacy role. As priority was given to an operational role in the North East, FORUT played down its human rights and peace advocacy role. FORUT has also enabled poor, marginal and socially excluded groups to approach local governance institutions, although such participation has taken place within a traditional framework of political interaction whereby promises of resources have been exchanged for votes.

#### *Human rights*

SC Norway has a clear human rights mandate based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and has adopted strategies in line with this mandate which clearly have had a direct impact on children's rights, primarily in terms of access to education, but also in terms of advocacy work at the national level on these issues. Although the promotion of human rights is one of the objectives of FORUT, the organisation does not focus explicitly on this area; it is not the dominant discourse or practice in FORUT. Yet FORUT's work has had a positive impact, primarily in terms of socio economic rights.

#### *The value added by Norwegian NGOs: advocacy and innovation*

Norwegian NGOs have taken up advocacy in areas in which national and local NGOs are reluctant to do so because challenging the state may jeopardise their service delivery role. The lessons learned from the work of SC Norway in Ethiopia suggest that policy influence could be achieved if: i) the subject matter can be couched in relatively technical terms and the Norwegian NGO can perform an advisory role; in the case of child rights it has the additional advantage of being based on an international mandate, ii) the approach is part of a broader alliance iii) the approach is well targeted in a specific field.

The role of SC Norway in Ethiopia in terms of developing new approaches to informal education and the corresponding role of FORUT in war-affected areas in Sri Lanka in terms of running "catch up" education classes are important innovative contributions to the education sector in both countries in contexts in which the state lacks both resources and capacity.

#### *Reporting*

NGO reporting has largely been undertaken in terms of activity and output reporting. Only recently have concerns about the more long term impacts of interventions been placed on the agenda. The current reporting system is descriptive and focuses on deviations from the plans. The system is inadequate in terms of capturing the role that NGOs play as change advocates.

### **Recommendations in brief**

#### *For NGOs*

- The long term challenge is to build the capacities of national and local civil society organisations to affect change. Resources must be allocated accordingly, methods developed that ensure effective and mutual transfer of competence and expertise, and funding arrangements examined to ensure that they are designed to support more long-term change processes. Moreover, organisational practice should reflect the objective of capacity building and empowerment.
- Civil society organisations must clearly identify areas of intended change, the change agents that can be mobilised within that particular field, and how change can be affected, allocate resources accordingly and sustain their efforts to achieve the intended change.

- A crucial element in comprehensive strategies for change is networking and alliance-building, also outside the traditional NGO/CBO networks, and such efforts need to be strengthened if macro level and institutional change is to be achieved.
- NGOs must strike a balance between service delivery, advocacy, mobilisation and innovation. Sometimes these roles are mutually supportive, for example when the first hand knowledge gained through service delivery on the ground backs up advocacy.
- NGOs and their partners are in a position to target groups that are marginal, excluded, stigmatised and vulnerable. The strengths of NGOs in delivering such services should be carefully preserved and intervention methodologies strengthened.

#### *For donors*

- Guidelines at the donor level need to be translated into country contexts and local contexts and realistically assessed at these levels in order for them to become meaningful to the NGOs. Donors should be responsive to feed-back coming from the field and put in place mechanisms to process this feed-back. Donors should be open and engage in frank discussions with Norwegian NGOs and their partners with respect to how their overall objectives can be realised within specific country contexts.
- The guidelines represent the Norwegian government's "change theory" for civil society at the macro level, yet most civil society organisations operate at the micro level and affect change mainly at the individual and household level. The guidelines should address this gap between micro and macro and between individuals and communities, on the one hand, and institutions on the other. Moreover, the guidelines should be reviewed regularly through a consultative process with Norwegian NGOs and their partners.

#### **Reporting**

- A generic framework for reporting on efforts to civil society strengthening should include the micro, meso and macro levels and be concerned with impact on individuals, communities, organisations and institutions.
- We suggest that for the purposes of annual reporting and final reports, reporting on capacity building designed to strengthen partnerships, networks and relationships to institutions is critical in order to assess civil society strengthening and impact.
- Another useful way of assessing whether Norwegian NGOs and their partners are on target is by way of examining whether the change theory on which an NGO intervention is founded is working. One significant advantage of this approach is that it can be carried out in the form of self-assessment by staff.

#### **Conclusions**

Overall, the study findings suggest that Norwegian NGOs and their partners play a limited role in terms of contributing to broader social, economic and political change processes. Impact can be found primarily at the micro level, while the effective networks and alliances that could provide linkages between the micro and macro levels are missing. Despite the fact that the organisation's interventions have made a positive difference in people's lives, impact at the organisational, institutional and structural level is considerably more modest. In the study several reasons have been identified in order to explain the lack of impact on broader social change processes.

- the pull towards service delivery and the organisational challenge involved in combining service delivery with advocacy and social mobilisation
- the lack of networks that link community based organisations together
- the inability of NGOs to build alliances with other civil society organisations, such as professional associations, trade unions and faith based groups.

The report suggests further research into i) the role and potential of NGOs as change agents ii) the role that civil society has played in democratic change processes and the lessons that can be learned from donor support to these processes iii) further development of the change theory approach and the implications for reporting.

**A report prepared by the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR) in collaboration with Chr. Michelsen Institute for the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad).**



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