Supporting democracy by supporting civil society organizations: going beyond the usual suspect?

A comparative study of internationally funded CSOs in Ghana and Indonesia

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Promoting democracy and good governance in developing countries is an important aspect of development assistance of most Western donors. One way of promoting democracy and good governance that has become popular during the 1990s, and still continues today, is building a strong and critical civil society sector. Although it is widely believed, both by donors and in theory, that civil society makes a positive contribution to the process of democratisation, there is no consensus on the role that it should play (Robinson and Friedman, 2007: 643). One of the reasons for this lack of consensus is that civil society as a concept is very difficult to define, let alone identifying its contribution to democracy. Furthermore, it is also questionable whether the role that civil society can or should play in democratization is similar around the world. A widely heard critique of the donor approach is that it is not very sensitive to differing national contextual factors, because the same approach is applied in very different national settings (see for instance Mercer 2002).

Despite the lack of clarity on the contribution of civil society organisations (CSOs) to democracy, a big amount of donor money is being invested in them. This paper therefore aims to identify what and how these sponsored CSOs contribute to the process of democratization and to what extent this contribution differs in different national settings. The paper therefore addresses the following questions: 1) What do donor sponsored CSOs in Ghana and Indonesia contribute to democracy and how do they do this? and; 2) How are these contributions similar or different in Ghana and Indonesia and to what extent does donor support explain for these similarities or differences?

Academic discussions on the contribution of civil society to processes of democratization often remain at a high level of abstraction. Most theories focus on a macro level of how civil society as a realm or sphere contributes to democracy. A good example of this is provided by Edwards (2004) when he states that "In its political role civil society is providing a crucial counterweight to states and corporate power, essential in promoting transparency, accountability and other aspects of 'good governance' as well as in fostering democracy itself". Like Edwards, many other authors remain at this high level of abstraction (Diamond 1999; Fowler 2000; Sorensen 1993; White 2004). It is difficult to find concrete notions on what individual CSOs can contribute to democracy and on how they can do this. The most comprehensive study in this respect has been done by Warren (2006) and, to some extent, Hadenius and Uggla (1996) and Fung (2003) also contribute ideas at this lower level of abstraction. Based on their ideas, combined with the more general notions of others, I have developed an analytical framework for understanding the role of CSOs in supporting democracy. I distinguish four democratic roles (i.e. educational, communicative, countervailing and cooperative) and link the performance of these roles to individual organisational characteristics like organisational structure, organisational strategy and organisational environment. This framework is used to analyse the specific activities of the selected CSOs in Ghana and Indonesia.

The paper is based on fieldwork in Ghana and in Indonesia. In this comparative case study, the first step was to identify which group of CSOs were getting a lot of donor support and were seen as key players in the field of democratisation and good governance. In each country a shortlist of organisations was compiled by interviewing representatives of donor agencies and local civil society experts. Finally in each country, five organisations were selected for analysis. The fieldwork consists of 45 in-depth interviews with key respondents of
the selected CSOs, with representatives of donor agencies, with local political scientists and with other experts in the field. All interviews have been fully transcribed and have been coded in Atlas.ti. The comparative aspect of the case study covers two levels, namely a within country and a between country comparison. Within each country a comparison is made between the selected organisations to see how and why organisations differ in the democratic roles that they perform. Between countries a comparison is made between the groups of organisations, to see whether different national settings lead to the performance of different democratic roles.

The analysis shows that most sponsored CSOs perform multiple democratic roles and that their performance can be largely explained by specific organisational characteristics. An important finding is that, within the educational role, none of the selected CSOs acts as a ‘schools of democracy’. This Tocquevillian idea of citizen socialisation into the norms and values of democracy is strikingly absent. The main explanation for this is that normal citizens are largely absent in the kind of organisations that are being sponsored, none of them have a broad popular membership base. This is the case in both Ghana and Indonesia. When comparing the two countries the selected CSOs show many similarities in both organisational characteristics (structure, strategy, kind of personnel, etc.) and in the democratic roles that they perform, despite operating in a totally different national setting. The biggest differences can be found in the themes or the specific institutional aspect of democracy on which they focus, but not so much in their approach. The paper concludes that donor conditionalities and donor priorities play a big role in this form of isomorphism.

**Literature**