

Research impact: making a difference

Strengthening civil society in developing countries through targeted aid

Professor Jude Howell helped the Australian Government refine its efforts to strengthen the role and effectiveness of civil society in developing countries

What was the problem?

'Civil society' refers to that part of society consisting of independent non-governmental organisations linked around shared concerns and collective activity to promote citizens' interests and concerns. In developing countries, civil society can be a powerful agent for change. Alongside government and private sectors, it can contribute to improved services, enhancement of social inclusion and government accountability.

For donor organisations from other countries, it is not always clear which civil society organisations have local legitimacy, strong management or genuine transparency. Donor organisations also face practical challenges, such as potential duplication of activities or funding of identical activities by a different donor, the difficulties of expanding or replicating small, successful activities, and inadvertent financing of terrorism. Donors are, naturally, held to account for the actions of the independent civil society organisations they choose to fund.

What did we do?

Professor of International Development Jude Howell, formerly Director of the LSE Centre for Civil Society, had been researching the strengthening of civil societies for almost two decades. Her research had established a set of principles for the effective working of civil society, including:

- the importance of uncovering local cultural 'norms' about democratisation, poverty and accountability
- the importance of placing donor engagement within a political debate about the relative roles of civil society, the state and the marketplace in providing for global security – not just for donors but also for partner countries, where the very idea of civil society might be perceived as threatening
- avoidance of the tendency to give precedence to non-governmental organisations at the expense of other pivotal civil organisations like faith groups and trade unions

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- the significance of local context, including the history of state-civil relations and competing visions of civil society
- the significance of the 'War on Terror' in decisions about development aid and the danger that civil society organisations are drawn into security agendas either as possible suspects or as potential anti-radicalisation agents.

The Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) subsequently commissioned Howell to serve as lead researcher on a review of the Australian Government's approach to civil society in its aid programme to developing countries. *Working Beyond Government: Evaluation of AusAID's Engagement with Civil Society in Developing Countries* (Howell and Hall 2012) was based on fieldwork in Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines and made seven key recommendations, which included:

- development of a framework that recognises civil society in developing countries as an integral part of the development process
- incorporation of analyses of civil society in country analyses and integration of country-specific strategies within aid programmes
- investment in civil society advisors and creation of lesson-sharing networks.

What happened?

AusAID management agreed to take forward all seven of the report's recommendations. In a 2012 presentation on NGO policy at the Crawford School of Public Policy, the Director of AusAID declared that his organisation's response to Howell's evaluation came directly from the AusAID Executive and that it had focused AusAID's attention on the issue of civil society in a new way. The Australian Council for International Development (the coordinating body for NGOs) indicated strong support for Howell's work and spoke publicly about significant alterations to its engagement with civil society, as well as its intention to use the evaluation to lobby AusAID for an increased focus on civil society engagement.

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in 2012, recognised the importance of an 'informed and engaged' civil society. AusAID described the new approach as 'a significant shift'.

Following implementation of Howell's seven recommendations, the Engagement Framework heralded a number of significant impacts, including:

- A substantial increase in the amount of funding for NGOs
- A doubling of funding to the Australian NGO Cooperation Project
- Establishment of the Civil Society Network, a cross-agency working group
- Establishment of the Civil Society Portal, a website for all civil society organisations which acted as a central information hub
- The undertaking of a civil society analysis in all country programmes.

From 2012 the Engagement Framework was progressively rolled out across all 37 developing countries in which AusAID worked. Examples of implementation included:

- The Philippines programme replaced its longstanding small grants assistance programme with *Coalitions for Change*, which took a more strategic approach to work with civil society organisations
- The Indonesia programme completed a review designed to maximise NGO involvement in poverty reduction and identify ways to engage directly with NGOs
- The Papua New Guinea programme worked with a range of civil society organisations to develop a concrete strategy for mapping and addressing capacity-building needs.

Implementation of the Civil Society Engagement Framework was expected to be completed by December 2013, and the Director of the AusAID Office of Development Effectiveness predicted that the report would continue to have a 'concrete and positive' impact on the way that AusAID worked with civil society.

Jude Howell is Professor of International Development at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her main research interests are governance and civil society in development contexts, particularly in China. She has written extensively on issues of governance and civil society; gender and civil society; security, aid and civil society; and organising around marginalised interests. She was Director of the Centre for Civil Society (2003-2010), is Director of the ESRC Non-governmental Public Action Research Programme (2003-) and editor of the Palgrave book series on Non-governmental Public Action. She has provided advice to international donors such as AusAID, DfID, Ford Foundation, ILO, and UNDP.

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