

Participation in Democratic Governance



**Four methods reports
have been published:**

The Political Institutions

Participation in Democratic Governance

Good Governance

Legal Sector

A summary of the four methods reports,
Digging Deeper, was published in 2003

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1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose and Methods of the Study

Background and Disclaimer

The goals of Swedish development co-operation within the operational area of *democratic governance* are clear and primarily consist of the government's publications on *Democracy and Human Rights in Sweden's Development Co-operation (1997/98:76)*, *Human Rights in Swedish Foreign Policy (1997/98:89)* and *Sida's Programme of Action for Peace, Democracy and Human Rights*. The operationalisation of policy and goals into applications and inputs in the field requires continuous methodological work.

In 1999 Sida initiated four comprehensive internal projects to develop methodologies within the operational area of democratic governance. When initiating the four projects, the primary intention was to work out better methods and strategies to achieve the goals set up by Sweden's government and parliament (riksdag). The work was initially internally developmental within the division, with intention of improving the quality of development co-operation. Sida's staff turnover, their frequent moves between the field and home offices and colleagues' varied backgrounds mean that there is an ever-present need to increase competence and create an organisational memory for Sida. Virtually all members of the division for democratic governance (DESA) and many other Sida colleagues have thus participated in the methodological work during some phase of the project.

The project embraces four subsections:

- Political institutions;
- Swedish Development in the legal sector
- Good governance;
- Participation in democratic governance.

The official instructions charge Sida with the assignment of reporting on the methodological work before April 30th, 2002. This was to be done in the form of a document that provides a *synthesis*, which can offer the basis for dialogue between the Swedish Foreign Ministry and Sida on the further direction of goals and reports of results of the work. Experiences and proposals should be shared with other donors and form a framework for discussions with external co-operating partners. The four project documents and the synthesis are available at Sida's division for democratic governance.

These project documents do not necessarily reflect the views of the Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency, Sida.

This Project

This paper presents the work of the project group for *participation in democratic governance*. The purpose of this study is to present an overview of methods for strengthening the institutional and cultural relationship between the state and society through the promotion of participation.

The methods are analyses of contemporary trends in research, practical experience from Swedish development co-operation, gathered through a questionnaire to the Swedish embassies working with democratic governance and human rights, and interviews with Swedish non-governmental organisations.

The project group has studied different forms of participation in order to achieve a common understanding. Direct participation and indirect participation through the election of political representatives have been considered equally important to study.

It is important to note that human rights are not limited by citizenship and, therefore, that the right to participate belongs to all people within the boundaries of a state. While people without citizenship cannot vote or stand as candidates during elections, they still have the right to participate. While observing that some sections of the population in a country may not be included in the citizenry of that country, we consider that to work for democratic governance and human rights ultimately depends on empowering such groups through their inclusion into the citizenry, thereby opening up the political system for participation and protection of rights that may otherwise not be provided.

The following have been studied:

- Different channels for participation
- Civil society and its structures and institutions (including questions of representativeness and the boundaries between organised and unorganised)
- The enabling of state institutions at all levels

1.2 Definitions and Limitations of the Study

The intention has not been to study different methods of participation, such as participatory rural appraisal, but instead to focus on participation as a goal of democratic governance and thus on *the nature* of participation. For this purpose, a wider definition of the concept has been used, which includes both direct and indirect forms of participation. This paper is especially concerned with how these forms of participation can be strengthened through the interaction between the state and civil society, which involves many different types of voluntary organisations, from grassroots associations and trade unions, to large, well-organised associations operating at higher levels in political systems.

In the broader sense of the word, DESA sees *participation in democratic governance as the process through which people take part in, and influence, public decisions that affect their lives*. This includes direct and indirect ways for people; women, men, girls and boys; to exercise influence as individuals, as members of networks and associations, and through various political institutions, e.g. elected assemblies at all levels, government administration and ministries.

The importance of participation in relation to the democratic state is based on the idea of political equality. People need to feel that their participation is regarded as valuable and leads to real influence on the decisions taken by their political representatives. Experience shows that the more influence and access to power over decision making people have, the more prone they are to get involved and to participate.

Participation in relation to the actions and decisions of the state can be defined by different degrees. The lowest and first degree of participation is to be informed; the second, to be consulted regarding limited issues; the third, to influence major decisions; and finally; to share decisions through, for example, a popular vote.

This paper on participation in democratic governance focuses mainly on those aspects of participation that intersect with the political institutions. It also recognises the importance of other forms of participation that are not obviously associated with political institutions, not least because of the impact that such participation may have on the democratic culture and social capital of a country.

The discussion on participation, however, often assumes that the responsibility lies with the individual, association or political party. It is, therefore, important to emphasise that not only does the state play an important role in allowing, stimulating and creating a democratic sphere and an enabling environment for participation, not least for weak and marginalised groups – but that it is also the responsibility of the state to involve its people in decision making to the best of its ability.

Investments in people's capacity to participate and the creation of favourable conditions for their exerting an influence on the decisions that affect their lives, are important parts of supporting democratic governance and poverty eradication. The reduction of poverty goes beyond growth and involves not only access to political and economic power, but also implies social inclusion and the promotion of participation. The state has obligations and responsibilities to do its utmost to eliminate poverty and to implement appropriate policies. In order to hold governments accountable, people need to be organised, informed, able to claim political space and to influence the public services that affect them. It is especially important that poor and previously excluded groups acquire at least some capacity to assert themselves and claim their rights.

Democracy is the only form of political regime compatible with respect for all categories of human rights – civil, cultural, economic, political and social – and it is the responsibility of the state to protect and promote them. Some rights require mechanisms that ensure protection from the state, while others need active promotion by the state. The Human Development Report 2000¹ defines four features of a democracy based on human rights:

- Holding free and fair elections contributes to the fulfilment of the right to political participation.
- Allowing free and independent media contributes to the fulfilment of the right to freedom of expression, thought and conscience.
- Separating powers among branches of government helps protect citizens from abuses of their civil and political rights.
- Encouraging an open civil society contributes to fulfilment of the right to peaceful assembly and association.

There are important links between the two broad sets of rights – civil and political rights, and economic, social and cultural rights². Studies have shown important causal links between rights such as freedom of participation and expression, and freedom from discrimination and poverty. Civil and political rights empower people to achieve their economic, social and cultural rights. Moreover, people who enjoy economic, social and cultural rights are better able to assert themselves in efforts to secure their civil and political rights.

¹ Human Development Report, Human Rights and Human Development, UNDP, 2000.

² Although often presented as two sets of rights, the Vienna conference of 1993 established that all these rights are universal and interdependent.

2 Importance of Participation for Democratic Governance

2.1 Participation and Democratisation

In this paper, the concept of participation in democratic governance focuses attention on the *interaction and linkages between state and society and how the people can take part in public life*. The principles of democracy and human rights overlap, but are separate. While democracy is the process whereby the people collectively decide on the priorities and policies of public life, human rights are the individual guarantees that the state is set to uphold and respect – and that make participation in democratic governance meaningful.

2.1.1 The Importance of the State “Rediscovered”

Perspectives on the role and importance of the state in development thinking and practice have changed over the years, but have always been hotly debated. From a position of regarding the state as the central agent for development, which characterised many newly independent countries in the wake of decolonisation in the 1960s – at least partly inspired by the development of the welfare state in the west – in the late 1970s and 1980s (the era of structural adjustment) the state was seen more as an obstacle to development. However, two trends during the last decade have resulted in a renewed emphasis on the state as a development actor.

The first of these trends is the wave of democratisation that swept Latin America and parts of South East Asia in the 1980s, and Eastern Europe and Africa south of the Sahara in the 1990s. In the mid-1990s, more people than ever before lived under governments that they themselves had had the right and opportunity to elect.

The second trend is the increased focus on human rights and a human rights based approach to development that is gaining ground in development work and thinking, which identifies the state as the main actor for implementing and upholding respect for those rights. In this regard, national institutions, ombudsmen as well as other institutions, systems and regulations created to monitor and follow up the state’s adherence to human rights are of great importance.

The central declaration and conventions are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) from 1948, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) from 1966, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) from 1966, the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) from 1989, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) from 1979, the International Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) from 1965 and the Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) from 1984.

By the mid-1990s, very many governments around the world had ratified several of the human rights conventions.

The first trend, democratisation, can be seen to create conditions for the most favourable enabling political environment for development, namely democracy, while the emphasis

on human rights provides guiding principles for the substance as well as for the process of sustainable development.

2.1.2 Both Direct and Indirect Participation is Important

This growing understanding that development must be linked to the rights of people and the responsibility of the state has repercussions on how to understand and interpret participation. In earlier development work and debate, participation was closely associated with the community or social sectors – most often outside or as a substitute for the domain of the state, as it focused on internal processes among marginalised groups, self-help groups and social movements. Participation then came to be associated with development projects and programmes as an important tool for achieving success. This form of participation has largely been perceived as non-political, as its scope was narrow and confined to the immediate stakeholders and was not linked to broader issues of democracy and policy formulation.

With the growing scope for participation through political institutions in the wake of the recent wave of democratic upsurge, the focus has shifted to include *governance structures and political institutions and the degree to which they are open; by way of inclusiveness, transparency and accountability*. A change of focus has been strengthened further by a move in most developing countries – including some which are not democracies at the national level – towards increased political decentralisation. Political institutions are gaining in importance both at the local level and higher up, at intermediate levels, where there previously has been a very limited presence of the state. It is at this local level of governance that social or community forms of participation are now merging with political participation through decentralisation.

The democratic systems in most countries are representative and consequently offer very few opportunities for direct participation in decision-making processes. Participation is often defined and limited to the right to vote. A representative democracy demands free and fair elections and also that party candidates compete in an open and fair manner. Likewise, a real choice between viable alternatives needs to exist for the voters. The political parties have a key role in gathering and collecting opinions to develop political platforms for the “common good”. People need to feel that they have access to political influence in order to participate effectively. The more people feel they have a share in development in their society, the more motivated they are to participate.

A viable civil society can never be a substitute for political parties. It should be seen as an independent and valuable complement in a representative democracy. Large parts of civil society pursue the interests of a certain group, which often gains the specific interests of that group. However, it is also valuable to create common space to discuss and solve issues that concern all the groups and stakeholders of a society.

Direct participation in relation to decisions taken by the public administration should be encouraged to a greater extent. A modern public administration should keep the “user of its services” in focus and allow for demand driven policy development and implementation. This can lead to greater effort and interest on behalf of the state to involve different stakeholders in the development of public services and thereby increase people’s influence on the design of these services.

Democratic governance offers few direct ways to exert an influence, but nevertheless there are many possible ways for citizens to exercise public control and to influence the activities of the administrative authorities. One of the most important is the right to appeal against a decision that has been made by a public body. Another example is the right of access to official documents, which individuals can use to become informed of how decisions are made by the representatives of the state. In many countries special authorities, such as Ombudsmen, have been set up to take care of the interests of the individual citizen *vis-à-vis* the administrative bodies. However, these mechanisms require an independent and functioning judicial system, which unfortunately does not always exist in developing countries.

A combination of an indirect participation through conscious voting in elections, mechanisms of complaint, and organised direct participation by stakeholders in public decision making, are examples of people's participation in the processes of a democracy.

2.2 Participation and Poverty Reduction

2.2.1 A more Holistic Poverty Definition Needed

Poverty reduction is the predominant objective of Swedish development co-operation. How, then, can support to democratic participation promote the achievement of this objective? What are the linkages between participation and poverty reduction?

In 1978 the Swedish Parliament confirmed the poverty orientation of Sweden's development co-operation by stating that it aimed at

... Achieving a higher standard of living and more equitable conditions for poor people, to ensure that their fundamental needs are met and that they are involved in political decisions which determine the way society develops.

This declaration reveals a broader view of poverty, sometimes defined as *human poverty*. While *income poverty* has the more classical meaning of lack of material assets, the term "human poverty" implies something broader. It includes, first and foremost, *the lack of power to control and influence one's own life*. It also reminds us that disadvantaged groups lack the capabilities and possibilities to live a secure, healthy and creative life, to enjoy a decent standard of living, to be informed and to enjoy dignity and self-respect. This often implies different meanings for different people, depending on social status, sex, ethnic group etc., which must be taken into consideration. It also means that poverty not only involves a lack of access to and control over economic assets, but also over political and social assets, all of which are necessary to facilitate empowerment, promote opportunity and ensure security for poor people. Accordingly, poverty reduction policy cannot be limited to growth and equitable distribution of resources; it must also involve a sound allocation of political and economic power, democratic governance, social inclusion and human development.

UNDP also adopts the broader meaning of poverty. In its Human Development Report 2000, UNDP argues that the diverse human rights – civil, political, economic, social and cultural – are causally linked and thus are mutually reinforcing, creating synergies that contribute to the empowerment of the poor. Furthermore,

... Because of these complementarities, the struggle to achieve economic and social rights should not be separated from the struggle to achieve civil and political rights.

Thus, the promotion of human capabilities and the securing of human rights can empower poor people to lift themselves out of poverty.

2.2.2 The “Rights Approach” Enhances Poor People’s Empowerment

Some important causal links between rights such as freedom of participation and expression, and freedom from discrimination, have been linked to poverty in different studies. For example, it has been found that in a society with a democratic government and a relatively free press, it is not likely that famines will occur.³ In addition, the absence of civil and political rights can hinder access to social, economic and cultural rights. For example, labour rights can be inaccessible unless workers have the right to associate and to express themselves freely.

We can turn this around and see that the causal connection operates in the other direction too. People who do not suffer from extreme poverty and discrimination are more likely to possess the capacity and the confidence to take action – often as participants in collective efforts – to secure their political and civil rights.

To say this is not to deny that there is sometimes a degree of dissonance between the pursuit of these two kinds of rights. When individuals and organisations work to secure all these rights at the same time, their efforts are sometimes spread too thinly across too broad an agenda, so they have little impact. Alliances formed to secure civil and political rights may differ in their composition from those that seek to secure social and economic rights – and this can produce conflicts that undermine one or the other of these aims. For example, if a coalition of groups forms to pursue greater freedom of expression or assembly, civic associations whose main aim is to reduce poverty may temporarily postpone efforts on that front to join the campaign for greater political rights – and such postponements may last for a very long time. When struggles to achieve greater political and civil rights open up new space for assertive action by citizens and associations, that space may be seized mainly by prosperous groups who are unsympathetic to greater social and economic rights for poor, excluded groups.

But despite these problems, which need to be carefully watched, civil and political rights still tend strongly to reinforce social and economic rights and vice-versa. Complementarities between these two sets of rights usually outweigh this dissonance.

The state is responsible for doing its utmost to reduce poverty by adopting and implementing appropriate measures and policies. The Human Development Report 2000 points to six elements of policy that are central for accelerating poverty reduction and realising human rights. One of them is to ensure participation:

Poor people have a right to be consulted on decisions that affect their lives. This requires processes that expand the political space to give voice to poor people and their advocates, including NGOs, free media and workers associations.

As shown above, the capability as well as the opportunity to participate and thus influence the decisions that affect one’s daily life are important for advancing social and economic progress and reducing economic and social poverty and inequality. However, special consideration must be given to the fact that information about important public policy and planning decisions is less accessible to the poor and that the poor are often less

³ Sen, A., *Poverty and Famines: an essay on entitlement and deprivation*, 1995.

able to express their views. Illiteracy, language barriers, disabilities, and physical remoteness can all create communication difficulties even when the press is free. The state thus has an obligation to put in place accessible information and decision-making processes that are transparent and open to dialogue, especially with poor and excluded people and communities.

Access to information enables the individual to monitor the actions of government employees and guard against corruption. Civil society can, at national and local levels, facilitate links between the community and the government and increase the involvement of excluded groups. It is, however, important to note that civil society groups do not always represent the interests of the poor. This needs to be taken into consideration when choosing methods for the promotion of participation. Where elites that are unsympathetic to the poor dominate society, increases in opportunities for participation may enable these elites to mistreat the poor more actively than before. In such situations, capacity-building efforts targeted directly at the poor are needed.

2.3 Participation from a Human Rights Perspective

Participation is the result of the recognition that men, women, girls and boys from all groups in society have rights and, therefore, should be consulted and empowered. Participation is both a result and a process.

The most detailed provisions of the right to participation in the central UN human rights conventions are found in CEDAW (The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women). CEDAW recognises the right to vote, the right to participation in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof, and the right to participation in non-governmental organisations. It also states that women have the right to participate in all aspects of public and political affairs. The convention affirms the equal right of women to participate in the implementation of development planning at all levels, as well as in the planning of rural development. As a pillar of the human rights conventions is the prohibition of discrimination, it could be interpreted that these rights, established in CEDAW, are applicable to all people, regardless of gender or age.

Commonly excluded groups such as, children – especially girls, youth, women, people from minorities, people with disabilities, and people living in rural areas cannot, from a human rights perspective, be excluded from participation.

The right to participation has consequences on support for participation by citizens and other people who live within the boundaries of the state. It means working for the obligation of the state at national, intermediate (provincial, district, county, etc.) and local levels to recognise the right to participation for all, as well as to ensure access to information by all individuals.

The CRC (The Convention of the Rights of the Child) does not use the word participation, but Art. 3 establishes “the best interests of the child” as a guiding principle, which is a justification for asking the child about his/her views, and implies participation. Art. 12 of the CRC emphasises the right of the child to express his/her views in all matters affecting the child. Art. 13 stresses the freedom of expression of the child. These articles are further rounded out by freedom of thought, freedom of association, access to information, and the special need to find ways of helping children with disabilities to

participate in the life of their communities. These articles imply that children should be involved to the maximum of their capacities in decision making that affects their lives. They should gradually become involved in matters which affect their larger community and society as a whole. Children should be seen as developing citizens rather than potential citizens.⁴ In its interpretation of the CRC, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child mentions the right to participate as a guiding principle.⁵

Creative ideas are required for the development of opportunities for children and youth to be consulted and to participate. They need to start young to learn how to negotiate and to dare to express their views. It is important that they have their own organisations. At school, children can participate in school councils and in active participatory teaching methods. Youth organisations offer adolescents an opportunity to develop the capacities and responsibilities to engage in action and dialogue with the larger society beyond their community.

Art. 21 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that, not only citizens, but everyone has the right to take part in the government of his/her country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. Art. 20 affirms the right of freedom of association and Art. 23 the right to join trade unions.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), recognises the right of all people to take part in the conduct of public affairs directly or through freely chosen representatives, but restricts this participation to citizens. Art. 1 of both ICCPR and ICESCR (The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) recognises the right of all people to participate freely in determining their political status, and in pursuing their economic, social and cultural development. Art. 15 in ICESCR recognises the right of everyone to take part in cultural life⁶.

2.4 Participation and Civil Society

2.4.1 Civil Society – What is it?

While civil society was scarcely mentioned in academic or aid related discussions ten years ago, it is not possible today to begin talking about democracy, human rights or participation without first defining the concept. Without going into the history of the concept, it is evident that it does have a long intellectual history, which makes it important to state clearly what it is that makes up civil society, in order not to confuse the discussion with preconceived notions.

Although civil society is a contested concept, along with power and democracy, there seems to be some consensus that civil society represents *organised forms of peoples' activities that are separate from the state and the family*. Except for employers' federations and sections of the media, business and institutionalised forms of political society are also usually left outside civil society. One way to formulate this is to say that civil society is⁷:

⁴ Hart, R, Children's Participation, 1998.

⁵ Hammarberg, 1999.

⁶ Dias, C.J., 1998.

⁷ This discussion on civil society draws on White 1994, Diamond 1998, Carothers 1999 and Sida's action programme for "Justice and Peace", as well as the Swedish Government's policy paper on "Democracy and Human Rights in Swedish Development Co-operation".

... An associational realm between state and family populated with organisations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests and values.⁸

What then is the associational realm? This study uses a broad and inclusive definition of civil society that includes many organised forms of people's activities in groups, networks and associations, like:

"Modern" interest groups such as trade unions or professional associations and traditional "ascriptive" organisations based on kinship, ethnicity, culture or religion; formal organisations and informal social networks; associations with specifically political roles [such] as pressure or advocacy groups and those whose activities remain largely outside the political system, legal or open associations and secret or illegal organisations, associations which accept the political status quo or those who seek to transform it.⁹

Civil society is, therefore, the realm of networks and associations that is voluntary, self-generating, at least partially self-supporting, largely autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or a set of shared rules. In this study, however, the definition is broadened to include associations that are not voluntary, but where the individual was born into the group. The reason for this is the strong traditions and culture in many developing countries, where an individual's identification, for example, is often to an ethnic group or a clan. Civil society is distinct from "society" in general in that it involves people acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, preferences, and ideas, to exchange information, to achieve collective goals, to make demands on the state, to improve the structure and functioning of the state, and to hold state officials accountable.

The first observation is that this view of civil society encompasses a vast diversity of different types of associational life. From a development co-operation perspective of democracy and human rights, most scholars, however, use a definition of civil society that only includes a narrow range of associations, or what could be labelled advocacy¹⁰ or civic¹¹ organisations. These groups seek to influence and improve the political system by promoting human rights for some or all groups in society (women, children, disabled, etc.), voter education and mobilisation, the transparency of political institutions, election monitoring, anti-corruption efforts, and legal aid. The important task may, therefore, not be to find an optimal definition for specifying which organisations do, or do not, belong to civil society, but to formulate a definition that clearly indicates the broader range of associations which should be labelled "civil society". Otherwise there is a risk of talking about civil society in broad terms, while in earnest only referring to a small, though important, section of civil society called advocacy or civic associations.

It is, therefore, important to recognise the vast range of associations and networks of civil society. They could be categorised as *economic* (commercial associations like employers federations), *cultural* (religious, ethnic, traditional and communal), *informational and educational* (production and dissemination of public knowledge, ideas and news), *interest* (trade unions and professional associations), *developmental* (seeking to improve

⁸ White, 1994:379.

⁹ Diamond, L., 1999.

¹⁰ Carothers, T., 1999.

¹¹ Diamond, L., 1999.

infrastructure, institutions and the quality of life in the community) and *issue-oriented* (environmental reform, land reform, consumer protection) – organisations. This should be done not only to promote a more balanced view of civil society, but also to show the potential for direct and indirect democracy and the human rights promotion of networks and associations that fall outside the advocacy category.

The merit of this way of thinking about civil society is that it not only includes networks such as different forms of credit associations, self-help networks, intellectual networks and neighbourhood associations, but also of course forms of illegal networks. Networks can perhaps take on even more forms than formal organisations, definitely make up a large portion of the social fabric, not least for poor and marginalised groups, and they do matter to people in their everyday life, often more than formal organisations.

Furthermore, there should be *no assumption about the relationship between the state and the civil society other than that of autonomy*, since groups with no direct relation to the state may indirectly have important effects on the state that promote democratic development.

2.4.2 Effective Participation Requires an Enabling Environment

One final point is crucial here. As some comments above have suggested, *participation on its own is not enough*. It can only be constructive if it occurs within structures that enable it to make at least some minimal impact on events. That is why so much attention is given in this paper not just to civil society, but to democratic processes and decentralisation as well. These three things can provide such structures. They can enable participation to have an impact, to influence outcomes.

Unless this happens, increased participation will eventually cause those participating to become frustrated because their efforts produce next to nothing. This is known from, for example, Ghana, where the creation of decentralised bodies persuaded people to participate more actively – but where the weakness of those bodies meant that increased participation had no impact. The result was still deeper popular cynicism, about government, and about participation, than had existed before. For this reason, the things that can, but do not always, enable participation to influence events – democracy, decentralisation and civil society – need to be examined further in the remaining sections of this paper.

3 Participation – Problems & Reflections

3.1 Socio-Economic and Cultural Obstacles to Participation

3.1.1 Poverty and Inequality Disempower People

In most countries, social, economic and cultural factors are of great importance for people's participation. Mass poverty, a low level of education, and other evidence of little respect for and realisation of economic, social and cultural human rights, will normally limit the expansion of participation, even in a system with democratic structures for participation. Hierarchical attitudes in unequal societies, rooted in traditional culture, often have the same effect. As a consequence, some theorists argue that socio-economic development by itself increases participation or at least creates conditions that may foster participation.

The participation of poor people is constrained by a shortage of time, since they must work for their daily survival. They also lack material resources and technical skills to organise effectively for collective action, and are often divided by race, religion, language, inadequate communications and dispersed settlement. A denial of their economic and social rights leads to fewer possibilities for them to take advantage of their political and civil rights¹².

Likewise, many poor people feel that participation in the formal channels of decision making, by exercising their political rights, is a difficult and ineffective way of achieving their economic and social rights.¹³ Instead they tend to use traditional systems to pursue their rights, as these systems are often closer to them. Yet such systems may be hierarchical and unresponsive. Therefore, there is much to gain from facilitating the access of poor people to official decision-making channels. In the words of the Human Development Report, 2000:

Given the causal links among the many human rights, they can be mutually reinforcing and can empower poor people to fight poverty. Guaranteeing civil and political rights is not only an end in itself – it is a good means to poverty eradication.¹⁴

Both the existence and the non-existence of traditional structures may constitute a hindrance for sound relations between the state and civil society. A strong traditional structure may not be compatible with democratic decentralisation that is aimed at encouraging dialogue and partnership between the state and civil society. A recent Danish evaluation shows that promoting participation within a cultural context in which tribalism and neo-patrimony are pervasive entails a risk of unintentionally reinforcing cultural and social discrimination.

In other situations, however, the very lack of a traditional structure can hinder participation. Traditional structures, which are not severely encumbered by hierarchy and patrimony, can equip ordinary people with skills, experience and knowledge that are useful for participation. If such structures are absent, those qualities may be in short

¹² *Human Development Report*, UNDP, 2000.

¹³ Robinson, M, "The Democratic Developmental State", p 161.

¹⁴ *Human Development Report*, UNDP, 2000.

supply. In countries, which have a history of effective grassroots organisations and social movements, people are more experienced at challenging and thus at counterbalancing the state's powers, and are more prone to attempt to do this. Robinson gives an example from Bolivia, where he found that it was easier for the municipalities which had a strong trade union tradition to influence decisions over municipal spending. By contrast, in those areas where people lacked organisational capacity or experience, participation was generally low.¹⁵

In countries with a strong history of socialism or even communism, individuals may have valuable skills and experience of participation in associational life, but not the will to use them, the reason being the notion of forced participation under the ruling party. This is, for example, the case in the former Soviet Union. This is not to imply that capitalism, and the global expansion of the market economy, in general, produce increased possibilities for people's participation. As previously mentioned, greater inequality – often the result of unchecked market forces – severely hampers poor people's empowerment. Material conditions play as important a role for obstructing or enhancing democratic participation, as do institutional, political, cultural or other factors.

The question of traditions is in some ways linked to the issue of participatory skills: knowledge, experience, leadership capabilities, etc. In some places, traditional institutions and leaders may impede broad participation. Yet if a traditional structure that promotes participation already exists, one is more likely to find people with these kinds of skills. The school has also an important role to play here. Weak participatory skills at different levels within both civil society and the state will render effective participation difficult.

3.1.2 Gender Equality: the Starting Point for a Democratic Culture

Cultural values and norms may also be a hindrance to participation, especially when it comes to the participation of women, children, and other excluded groups. The importance of including these groups goes further than attaining an improved gender balance; it is a crucial question for the development of a democratic culture and awareness of the possibilities of democracy.

Among the common constraints on women's participation, some of which are shared by other marginalised groups, are:

- their *limited time*;
- their *lack of financial and social resources* and *political experience*, which undermines their capacity to generate effective leadership and make an impact on public decision making;
- *male domination* of the main institutions, including democratic ones;
- a tendency amongst women's organisations to seek *distance from, rather than engagement with, the state*; and difficulties in establishing a common and coherent policy because of *differences of class, ethnicity, race, religion etc.*¹⁶

The methods for changing the culture and structure of organisations, in order to reduce gender bias, is not as fully developed as one might wish. Research on governmental, non-

¹⁵ Robinson, M, "The Democratic Developmental State", 1998.

¹⁶ Robinson, M, "The Democratic Developmental State", 1998, p 254.

governmental and private sector organisations has suggested several methods of bringing to the surface the diverse perspectives of various groups of people (including, of course, women) within such organisations. The research also suggests ways of working with powerful groups within organisations to promote dialogue among diverse groups and new work practices.¹⁷ These merit attention.

When decentralisation entails the creation of elected bodies at lower levels in political systems, women often have difficulty in winning seats and in making their voices heard once they occupy seats. The best strategy for tackling the first problem is to reserve a proportion of seats for women. In India, for example, 30% of seats in such bodies are usually reserved for women – they are elected by all voters (male and female) in selected constituencies, but only women candidates can stand for election. Some Indian states go further and reserve a proportion of chairpersons' posts in such bodies for women. This is far from a complete solution to the problem, but there is evidence to suggest that – over time – this will enable women to develop the skills and confidence needed to make an impact. One strategy to be avoided is to allow elected chairpersons of such bodies (or anyone else) to appoint women members. When that happens, the women are usually controlled completely by the person(s) who appointed them. There is also a tendency that mainly women from elite groups are selected.

The second problem, that of ensuring that women acquire influence in such bodies, is even more difficult. There is a tendency for women to congregate within certain sub-committees of decentralised bodies – for example, sub-committees dealing with the welfare of women and children. In some countries, rules forbid this, because it can cut women representatives off from influence over other important matters such as education and finance. But there is some utility in allowing women to congregate on a single committee, since this enables them to develop confidence and a sense of solidarity.

Another, perhaps obvious, approach to gender bias in the wider society and polity, is for donors to encourage governments to make changes in laws and policies that will foster gender equity. They may find it useful to encourage important firms in the private sector and large, well-organised non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to undertake well-publicised efforts to promote gender equity, beyond as well as within their organisations. Such actions will legitimise their efforts, and put pressure on other organisations (including governments) to do likewise. Donors might also urge large firms and NGOs to lobby governments for changes in laws and policies.

Donors have found it useful to provide direct support to organisations within civil society which seek to promote the rights of women, and such efforts should continue. In doing this, donors should be acutely sensitive to the possibility that the agendas of women's organisations in the West may not always be appropriate to the problems of women in less developed countries. They should also be aware that in some less developed countries, large, well organised women's associations may adopt Western agendas – even though they may be inappropriate – in order to obtain donor funding.

¹⁷ See for example, A. Rao, R. Stuart and D. Kelleher, *Gender at Work: Organizational Change for Equality* (Kumarian Press, 1998), especially Chapter Two.

3.1.3 Globalisation: a Potential Force for – and Obstacle to – Participation

As the world becomes “smaller” through intensified globalisation, new arenas and tools for participation emerge. So do the threats to participation, especially for marginalised and poor people.

As examples of the potential benefits, one may consider the greatly improved modes of communication that are now available. Modern IT technology – a result of the technological leaps made possible through mass consumption in the global market place – has changed the scene of popular mobilisation within and between countries. This can be added to the development of global air transport networks, and social changes such as the strengthened global consensus on and legal status of human rights. All of these, though, continue mostly to benefit the world’s rich minorities. For instance, while more than one fourth of USA’s population had access to the Internet in 1998, less than one percent did so in Latin America, 0.1 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa and 0.04 in South Asia.¹⁸

Global corporations are so powerful that they can often dictate the conditions under which they will establish operations in individual countries. Thus, the creation and nurturing of a country’s democratic culture and participation may well falter due to corporate norms and rules on working hours, labour rights, career incentives etc. that effectively obstruct openness and free participation as well as other human rights. The responsibility for respecting and upholding human rights in international law lies with the states, but their influence is increasingly undermined by global market forces. Even when they would like to follow more human rights oriented policies, states often find that economic concerns force them to adopt less acceptable practices.

On the other hand, there may be situations where the global corporations can instead play a constructive role.

Global corporations ... can disempower poor people and rob them of their dignity through hazardous and inhumane working conditions... [They] can cause human rights violations indirectly by relying on repressive regimes to create secure business conditions. But they can also be agents of positive change for human rights – they have a track record of policy lobbying on economic issues.¹⁹

There are several initiatives internationally for strengthening the accountability of global corporations for human rights, among them the UN Secretary-General’s “Global Compact”, which calls on corporations to assume a positive leadership role in the pursuit of human rights principles. However, without any effective means of sanctioning corporations for anti-human rights behaviour, as could be seen to develop in the context of the European Union, for instance, experience shows the difficulty of protecting human rights in the face of competing economic interests.

Development co-operation can help by strengthening the negotiating power of developing countries *vis-à-vis* higher-income countries, e.g. by supporting their participation in the WTO, in order to improve their stake in global trade. According to a recent UNCTAD study, up to USD 700 billion in additional annual export earnings could be attained through more advantageous world trade agreements for the least developed countries. The mere costs of participating in WTO negotiations are too high

¹⁸ Human Development Report, UNDP, 2000.

¹⁹ Human Development Report, UNDP, 2000.

for many countries; in turn, the possibilities are reduced for reconciling economic and democratic objectives in those countries, when they come into conflict. Thus, participation and transparency is needed not only for groups and individuals within countries, but also on the global level.

3.2 Decentralisation and Enhancing Participation from above

This section is limited to participation aspects in relation to decentralisation. Thus, it will not discuss in depth the pros and cons for decentralisation as well as division of responsibilities between national and local level.

Opportunities for participation depend on the existence of a democratic political environment as well as on legislation that stipulates a sound relationship between the state and its people. Sometimes that is not enough. In partner countries several new democratic regimes, with which Sida is working, may remain unconsolidated and without any deep roots among the people, so that they lack political legitimacy. When a human rights-based approach to participation is adopted, participation is interpreted as a fundamental human right, established in international law. Thus, the state is obliged to introduce supportive legislation, to safeguard and promote human rights as well as to promote a democratic sphere for people to claim their rights.

3.2.1 Decentralisation – Difficult while Promising!

The rules and regulations that govern the instruments of the state, and the way that the state uses these rules and instruments to carry out its tasks and responsibilities, also set the framework for civil society, local government, the media etc. One way for the state to enhance responsiveness and accountability is through *decentralisation* of decision making to lower levels of government. In the 1990s, local governance became of increasing interest to governments and to the NGO and donor communities. Over 60 less developed countries have experimented with some form of decentralisation, and the number is growing.

However, we have to bear in mind that decentralisation will not automatically lead to increased democracy and participation. As the following pages will discuss, there are several factors that need to be fulfilled for a successful decentralisation process.

One of the reasons that decentralisation can make governments more responsive is that elected decentralised institutions often become genuinely important arenas for interaction between the people, on the one hand, and the elected representatives and bureaucrats, on the other. They create entry points for individuals and groups to contact their representatives and civil servants, which is an important form of participation between elections and tends to increase strongly after decentralisation. When decentralised systems work reasonably well, they alter the very notion of participation. The people cease to be mere beneficiaries and become actors with rights and responsibilities.

The enthusiasm for decentralisation is logical alongside the increasing interest in civil society. When elected bodies are created at lower levels in political systems, it enlivens civil society in most cases. Old associations become more active than before and new associations are created, in response to the *new opportunities* which decentralisation can provide for people at the grassroots to influence decisions. It is also true that decentralisation usually works better in places where civil society is vibrant, although that

is not a necessary prerequisite – it has also achieved gains in countries where civil society is relatively under-developed.

Most studies of decentralisation have concentrated on *elected councils* or bodies at lower levels in political systems that are intended to make decisions affecting many different aspects of local life. They are thus “general purpose” bodies which are similar to town councils in the West. It is also important not to overlook another kind of decentralised body – *specialised “user groups” or committees* (sometimes called “stakeholder committees”) which bring local people into decision-making processes about education, water management, forest management, etc. Such “user groups” are often democratically selected. They exist in many less developed countries, often because donors insist that they be created. They are often found present in local settings where “general purpose” bodies have also been elected. When talking about decentralisation, it is important to take into consideration both types of institutions.

Here a curious pair of problems may occur that can afflict decentralised bodies – “unfunded mandates” and “excessively funded mandates”. When decentralised bodies, either “general purpose” bodies or specialised “user groups”, are given grossly inadequate, or no, funds to perform their duties, they face “unfunded mandates” which can destroy their effectiveness and their credibility with ordinary people. Sometimes, however, “user groups” are asked to manage huge sums of money that have been pumped in, often from donors, to improve schools, watershed development, forestry programmes, etc. These groups often lack the administrative resources to manage such sums effectively. The result is “excessively funded mandates” which, ironically, also undermine the credibility of decentralised systems. And sometimes, both unfunded and excessively funded mandates are present at the same time. This is the case for example in Zimbabwe today, where local councils of the “general purpose” type have been starved of funds by the government, while at the same time, specialised “user committees” find it impossible to manage excessive funding for projects in particular areas.

3.2.2 Power Structures are Key to Understanding Participation

Gaventa and Valderrama in their paper “Participation, Citizenship and Local Governance”²⁰, discuss different factors that may create obstacles for successful participation. One important factor is the *power relations*, since it is usually the government that sets and controls the structure and process for participation – and structures may not in reality let the people in. Local government control over the structure for participation may also restrict the influence of creative, traditional local decision-making channels because they might create friction between traditional and elected leaders.

Donors need to pay close attention to the precise *character of traditional leaders* in these situations. They may, as Gaventa and Valderrama suggest, be creative because they possess valuable local knowledge about the conduct of local affairs, for example, about the sustainable management of natural resources. On the other hand, traditional leaders such as chiefs in parts of Africa or caste leaders in India may sit atop stifling hierarchies which exclude women, young people, the poor etc. from influence. When they are of the second type, then democratic local bodies, which challenge them, generate creative friction, and deserve support.

²⁰ A background paper for a workshop on “Strengthening Participation in Local Governance”. 21–25 June 1999, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

Another problem is the *absence of a genuine political will* to provide and enforce opportunities for participation, be it at the central or lower levels. Even though existing legislation may set rules for participation at different levels, there might be reluctance to implement it. Powerful groups at higher levels in political systems – both politicians and bureaucrats – are often reluctant to see powers that they have long exercised transferred to people at lower levels. At lower levels, bureaucrats who have long operated fairly independently may be reluctant to allow elected representatives in decentralised bodies (or citizens) to join in the making and implementation of policy. Within elected bodies at lower levels, representatives of prosperous, high-status groups may be reluctant to permit representatives of poorer groups to have much voice in decisions. The participation of children and youth is often hindered by the attitudes of adults. It could be from fear of trying something new to lack of respect and low expectations of children and youth. Very often it is a matter of adults not wanting to give up their power and right to determine the lives and future of children and youth. Sometimes, children and youth are not seen as individuals but as part of the family represented by the father or an elder brother rather than by themselves. Government officials and politicians who would like to consult children and youth often lack skills in methodologies for consulting these groups.

A third factor affecting participation is *the quality of participation* that is offered to the people. The existence of a forum for participation, such as an elected, decentralised body, falls short if participation is limited to consultation rather than participation and influence in decision making. Many decentralised systems require elected representatives, in theory, to hold regular meetings at the grassroots at which all the residents are supposed to give their views on local affairs and, perhaps, take part in collective decision making. Elected members of local bodies almost always find these requirements annoying. They prefer to make decisions themselves, that is, they prefer indirect representative democracy to direct democracy. They also find it embarrassing to face criticisms from disenchanted local residents. As a result, they often fail to hold such meetings, or they hold them at times when people are at work, or they hold unannounced meetings, which they pack with their supporters. These are clearly violations of their legal responsibilities, and efforts should be made to prevent this.

There are, however, several other things to say about this problem. A little patience is called for since, over time, local residents are likely to become more aware of the requirement that such meetings be held and more assertive in their demands for them. It is also worth noting that government officials at higher levels often find it hard to make sure that such meetings are actually properly conducted, in a huge number of often remote local arenas.

3.2.3 Successful Decentralisation: Resources, Accountability and Legitimacy

Fourthly, if a decentralised system is going to be successful, *sufficient resources*, both financial and administrative, as well as *adequate power* must be delegated to the local level.

It is important that *enabling frameworks and institutional channels* be developed for active participation to occur. Two kinds of accountability mechanisms must be created if democratic decentralisation is to work well. Bureaucrats must be made accountable to elected representatives, and elected representatives must be made accountable to the people. Neither is easy to achieve, and in the absence of either, decentralised systems will be undermined.

However, there is a risk that mechanisms to ensure accountability and participation at national and lower levels may not bring about greater inclusiveness, although they might formalise the process of dialogue. These structures often suit elites better than the people as a whole. Corporatist mechanisms, institutionalised consultation and different kinds of commissions may often be ways to legitimise government policy and to give the impression that it has taken the voice of the people into account. Lack of expertise at local level and absence of national policies for decentralisation, accounting and monitoring system at national and local level can also hinder decentralisation efforts.

Sometimes a government may intentionally choose to operate in this way, because including all of the people would mean a change in current power relations not only between the government and the people, but also among the people. Attempts to increase participation in these ways can, therefore, reinforce inequality, as the more advantaged may find it easier to make their voices heard. One example is the tendency of increased consultations between government and business on macro-economic policy.

Democratic decentralisation is no panacea, but when it works well it has many virtues. It has a strong tendency to make government more transparent, effective and accountable. It makes it *more responsive*, in three ways. The speed of responses increases because local bodies acquire the power to act quickly without long waits for permission from higher authority. Secondly, the quantity of responses increases because members of decentralised bodies usually prefer many small development projects to the few big projects that people at higher levels favour. And the quality of responses improves – if “quality” is measured by the degree to which responses conform to popular preferences.

The *flow of information* between government and the people tends to increase massively – in both directions. As a result, bureaucrats feel empowered by the abundance of new information reaching them. It becomes easier for people at higher levels to acquire information about successes in individual localities, and to seek to replicate them in many more places. The decentralising government usually gains greater legitimacy. And because decentralised bodies usually implement projects which local people prefer, those people can acquire a greater sense of ownership of such projects and maintain them better – so that projects can become more sustainable.²¹

It is crucial to stress, however, that even when decentralised systems work well, they do not always lead to poverty reduction. Sometimes prejudices against poor, excluded groups are stronger at the local level than at higher levels in political systems. When that is true, the devolution of responsibility for poverty programmes onto councils at lower levels can hamper efforts at poverty reduction.

In many countries, leaders who have introduced genuine reforms for enhanced participation have found that the short-term loss of influence is more than matched by the long-term political gains that have resulted. Leaders and governments in general are usually seen as *more legitimate and enlightened* than before. Their popularity increases. And these reforms usually mean improvements in development outcomes, which are again welcomed by the people. It is also worth stressing that in an era in which governments are very short of money for grand projects that might earn them popularity, *many of these reforms can win popular acclaim without costing much*. They offer leaders a chance to appear

²¹ For a more detailed discussion of these and related issues, see Manor, *The Political Economy...*, Chapter Six.

adventurous and enlightened despite resource constraints. This has had a powerful appeal in some countries.

3.2.4 South-south "Persuasion" can be Effective

If a donor wishes to persuade important actors to try a new strategy or policy that can enhance participation, it often helps to put them in touch with similar actors from a nation in a similar situation who can explain both the strategy and its beneficial effects. The message is usually more persuasive coming from counterparts in a similar country than from a representative of a donor. Note, for example, that many leaders have decided to experiment with democratic decentralisation not because donors urged this, but because they saw that their counterparts in other countries had made good use of it.

The World Bank has found that when it wishes to persuade southern governments to undertake structural adjustment, the best way to succeed is to invite bureaucrats and politicians from countries that have done so to discuss their experiences with leaders who are considering it. There is no reason why the same approach cannot be used for quite different purposes – to persuade governments to democratise, to decentralise, to adopt more sympathetic postures towards civil society, and to foster participation in other ways.

This approach can be used not only with senior politicians and bureaucrats in governments, but also with elected representatives at lower levels, and with the leaders of civil society organisations. When this approach is used, it is always best to *develop dialogue between similar types of people* from different countries – bureaucrats with bureaucrats, politicians with politicians, etc.

3.3 Civil Society – How does it Enhance Participation?

In many countries today, we are witnessing a reversal of the third wave of democracy that has swept across the world since the mid-1970s. A growing number of countries are now better described as semi-authoritarian or illiberal democracies.²² In this situation we must ask ourselves where the impetus for the development and consolidation of democracy will come from? It is not unusual for governing elites to be repressive and corrupt, and to aim to preserve their grip on state power. While there may be elements within the state that favour reform, these groups and institutions often lack enough leverage to push the reform process forward themselves. It is, therefore, likely that only the broad public can generate the political pressure necessary to bring about reform. In order for the public to exercise this pressure, there need to be structures and organisations in place to channel this potential force for change, for democratisation. It is in this respect that a strong, pluralistic and representative civil society is so important.

The starting point is, therefore, the assumption that people's participation, and thus the interlinkages or spaces for interaction between the populace and the state, are important for democratic development. In other words, people's participation improves the efficiency of state responsiveness and policy formulation, it promotes transparency and accountability, and it deepens respect for, and builds a culture of, democracy.

²² See Huntington 1991 and Diamond 1998 on the third wave of democracy. A recent survey of 150 studies on democracy identified 550 ways in which to define and classify democracy.

3.3.1 Pluralism helps Counter-balancing the State

One obvious function of civil society is interest representation, which can foster pluralism. By acting collectively, people obtain political resources; skills, self-confidence, political awareness, etc. and, therefore, have an impact on the distribution of power in society and in the political system. In this way, groups, networks and organisations are in a better position to defend their interests in relation to other social actors and to the state. This may contribute to a more balanced power ratio between the state and society, if civil society is representative of broad sections of society – although this is clearly not always the case. In order for civil society to enable pluralism to flourish, it must possess substantial autonomy, power, diversity and representativeness. This pluralist or representative function of civil society is closely related to democracy, defined in terms of free and open elections, and respect for political and civil rights and the rule of law – in Sida’s terminology, *constitutional democracy*.²³

While this pluralist aspect of civil society is concerned with the external relations of civil society actors, the educational function is more concerned with its internal characteristics.

3.3.2 Fostering Democrats – Civil Society’s Educational Function

The educational function of civil society is related to democracy and development in the way that it shapes peoples’ values, attitudes and behaviour. Democracy does not only require functioning democratic institutions and channels that are open for participation. To work well, democracy also needs democrats. People’s habits of mind and heart must be such that they feel a strong commitment to the democratic system and a willingness to defend that system. The educational function of civil society, therefore, supports the dimension of democracy that Sida labels *societal democracy* – a term that implies that the citizens and organisations of the society practice tolerance, a willingness to compromise, accommodations to the views and opinions of others, and equal opportunities to participate in state and civil society institutions.²⁴ It is probably impossible to achieve this fully, but how can progress be made towards realising these goals?

It has been argued convincingly by many scholars and practitioners that a commitment to democratic principles can only be achieved and internalised among a populace through participation in democratic processes. While ordinary people often see state structures as distant and elevated, civil society structures can often be found around the corner. It is, therefore, often through the organisations and networks of civil society that people enter the educational process of learning democratic practices. (See above on the contribution that decentralisation can make). In this case, it is the participation per se, more than the purpose of the collective action, that helps the individual develop democratic skills – how to discuss public matters, to pursue one’s interests within the moderating structures of democracy, to understand opposing opinions, and to forge compromises. All of these important skills can be applied in more large-scale processes as well.

However, it is important to remember that not all forms of civil society activity will result in positive, educational outcomes. Indeed, civil society in some circumstances can undermine democracy. Civil society organisations do not always foster participation, nor do they always guarantee democratic values. These problems often arise when severe inequalities or serious

²³ “Justice and Peace” (1998), Sida’s action programme for peace, democracy and human rights.

²⁴ Sida’s action programme, “Justice and Peace”.

conflicts beset civil society, or when important organisations within it are intolerant of other groups and pursue their interests in a fiercely uncompromising manner. In former Yugoslavia, Vietnam and southern Italy, civil society has either strengthened an undemocratic culture or built a parallel structure in order to avoid the corrupt state.²⁵

3.3.3 Who does Civil Society Represent?

There is sometimes a danger that prosperous groups will dominate civil society and pursue their own interests very aggressively. This may cause them to discourage broad participation, to exclude disadvantaged groups, and to oppose poverty reduction. At the local level, hierarchical attitudes may inspire “commandism” among leaders. In some cases, there may be traditional leaders who preside over stifling hierarchies. In others, elected leaders from social groups that have exercised local hegemony may behave that way. In either case, participation suffers.

Important characteristics of civil society that fulfil the democratic educational function are, therefore:

- *Openness,*
- *A democratic and horizontal structure, and*
- *A broad and diversified membership base and financing.*

There needs to be *open recruitment* to organisations, meaning that membership is available to as many people as possible. This promotes contacts and networks across the various divides operating in society, like social, ethnic, religious, gender or caste lines. At the same time, fundamentalism and membership of associations that prohibit membership in other organisations within civil society are detrimental to democratic progress, due to their isolating effects.

When civil society organisations are *democratically structured* they largely exclude, for example, patron–client structures. It is often argued that horizontally, rather than vertically, structured organisations are more likely to help members internalise democratic values and practices.

A third criterion is that civil society needs a *broad popular base*. As many people as possible should be included in these educational processes, which in our countries of co-operation means that civil society must exist not only in urban, but also in rural areas, and that it (or many organisations within it) must be locally anchored.

It is further argued that the sense of ownership which is created through *members’ financing* (fees, voluntary donations of money, goods or labour) of organisations is, ironically, greater when the contributions are smaller. Poor people’s contributions give a stronger sense of ownership than larger contributions that can often be afforded only by the better off.

The importance of the latter criteria has been formulated as follows:

Without question, civil society makes its deepest, most organic, and most sustainable contribution to democracy when it cultivates a significant base of financial support among a broad and indigenous constituency.²⁶

²⁵ Van Rooy, A, “Civil Society and the Aid Industry”, p 45.

²⁶ Diamond, 1998:257.

Thus, it is important that, before making policy choices, donors estimate how well-equipped to pursue and defend their interests poorer groups in any particular country are. Their capacity to do so varies greatly from country to country. As noted earlier, in much of Latin America such groups are often better equipped to defend their interests than are their counterparts in most of Africa and Asia. Lack of information, non-access to education, health services, land or other denials of economic and social rights, will prevent most poor people from having a real chance at participation. In any given country, there is a need to develop some estimate of the strength of organisations that represent poor, excluded groups. Are disadvantaged groups politically aware, politically skilled, and self-confident? And do they have allies, in other social groups or in government, that might assist them? The answers to these questions will help to shape donor strategies in a country.

3.3.4 Social Capital – a Democratising Force?

Another potential function of civil society is the *creation of social capital*. Some scholars argue that:

Beyond the depth of commitment that is generated, raising indigenous financial contributions [in civil society] creates cultural norms of co-operation, trust, reciprocity, and public-spiritedness; it generates social as well as financial capital.²⁷

If this view is correct, social capital (interpersonal trust, a sense of mutuality, shared norms and networks) should be seen as essentially a by-product of civil society activities²⁸. There is, however, reason to doubt whether civil society is quite so capable of generating social capital. Empirical studies conducted within two major international research projects indicate that in many cases, far less social capital is actually generated than much of the (often theoretical) literature would lead us to believe.²⁹

Even if the optimists about the production of social capital are correct, the link between social capital and democracy is a contested issue. Social capital generated in closed groups with few contacts or links to actors outside the primary group may help those belonging to that group to achieve progress in promoting their own interests. Still, social capital generated in this way may create distrust towards outsiders and thus create conflict and tension in a wider social perspective. If social capital is generated under more heterogeneous circumstances, then there are good reasons for assuming that this will create processes and conditions which, to a greater extent, have positive democratic repercussions across a society.

Social capital created through particular forms of social organisation, most notably those that correspond to the educational function of civil society, may, therefore, have some potential for promoting democratic governance. This can also be a fruitful way in which to mainstream democracy in development co-operation, as organisational support is a crosscutting activity in all development programming.

²⁷ Diamond, 1998:258.

²⁸ We would like to see this as an important by-product of, primarily, civil society's educational function.

²⁹ These projects have been overseen by teams at the Johns Hopkins University and at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

4 Swedish Experiences from the Field

Sida's Action Programme for Peace, Democracy and Human Rights talks about the benefit of supporting the enhancement of individual and community participation for children, women and men in political, social and economic life as well as in development planning. Both the state and the civil society are acknowledged as actors in the implementation of that objective. However, the priorities presented in the Programme tend to focus on the specific areas of involvement, and support to democratic participation is more seen as a mainstreaming objective, not least in relation to support to civil society organisations.

Within the framework of this project, Swedish embassies responsible for support to the promotion of democratic governance and human rights have been consulted on their experiences of strengthening democratic participation and the role of civil society organisations in that kind of support. (The questionnaire is found in Annex 1.) Discussions have also been held with a few Swedish non-governmental organisations active in this field, in order to understand and learn from their work. (The NGOs are listed under References.)

4.1 General Lessons

4.1.1 The Nature of Participation is largely Context-specific

Experiences show that the national, historical and social contexts are important for the nature of participation in a country. Thus, the role, methods, focus, objectives, as well as relations to the state, the individual and international society are shaped by these factors. Strengthening participation and constructive relations between the state and civil society thus implies different strategies in different countries.

In order to do this, potential development agents must be identified and existing power-relations analysed. Far too often, civil society is stereotyped and perceived for what it seems to be, but not for what it is, *de facto*. In the West Bank and Gaza, for example, the health organisations play an important role as promoters of democratic participation. Although not democratic in their internal structures, they work in a participatory way with the people to develop their services to better suit the needs of the people that utilise these services, or in some other way are affected by them.

This further means that deep knowledge and insight into the local context and situation – economic, social and political – as well as into the organisations' functions and working methods, is needed for making the strategic choices that really help create positive development. Such knowledge is of the utmost importance if we are to support and not destroy positive internal forces and processes.

In some developing countries the mere existence of independent organisations is forbidden; in others they are strictly controlled. However, it has been possible to support some initiatives on participation in such countries.

Even in a country where organisations can exist openly, it is not given that organisations operate as instruments for the individual and his/her participation in society. Thus, to see organisations as a general platform for popular participation and a natural forum for

fostering democracy and participation is somewhat naive. Furthermore, quite often organisations are invited by the government first in the implementing phase, when the decision has been taken. Having said that, the potential of such organisations is still, needless to say, of utmost importance to foster participation.

4.2 How Government can Enhance Participation

4.2.1 The Grassroots Level is a Point of Departure

Experience shows that dialogue and co-operation between the individual and the state takes place most easily at the local level, and that the possibilities for active participation are more favourable at grassroots level. It is, therefore, useful to start locally and support initiatives that promote people's participation and democratic decision making at grassroots level.

However, one lesson learnt is that strengthening participation is not the same as strengthening or supporting non-governmental organisations. *Support to NGOs is often not sufficient*. The embassies consulted stress that support to NGOs needs to be complemented by *dialogue with and/or support to the municipal and central administration*, if the different levels are to meet and if more effective and open relations between civil society and the state are to be developed. Government institutions have the power to facilitate or to curtail the activities of civil society, and they often command substantial resources, which can be used more creatively if partnerships between state and civil society develop. So this relationship is exceedingly important.

Local government development in Honduras – Santa Rosa de Copán

The importance of complementarity of support to both civil society and the government has been acknowledged in the case of local government development in Honduras, Santa Rosa de Copán. Since 1997 Sweden, through Diakonia, has supported a local NGO working for decentralisation and increased autonomy for the municipality. Their work included information campaigns directed to the inhabitants, seminars for the members in the local government board, establishment of local interest groups etc., in order to make them understand both their rights and their responsibilities.

In parallel, Sweden supported a program directly aimed at the local council. This included training in how to govern a municipality, the rights of the inhabitants, the responsibilities of the council, how to increase openness towards the inhabitants and increase their participation in decision making etc. In addition, some development projects were promoted together with the inhabitants.

The local NGO played an important role in paving the way through enlightened residents who knew their rights and what kind of demands to make of the local government. The project has been a success and serves as an example for neighbouring municipalities.

4.2.2 Promotion of Decentralisation

Decentralisation is another, and can perhaps be a more direct, way to strengthen the relationship between the state and the individual, as it can bring decision making closer to the people. However, there are many factors that affect outcomes which have to be taken into account in order to achieve successful results. To work well, elected bodies at lower levels need to be provided with adequate funding, adequate powers over bureaucrats, and mechanisms to ensure that bureaucrats are accountable to elected representatives and that elected representatives are accountable to the people.

Further, it has been confirmed that positive changes and processes – e.g. administrative reform, legislation, and decentralisation – can promote more efficient and democratic relations between the individual and the state, which should be supported. Actors who can have a positive complementary impact on such processes must be taken into consideration and become involved.

Such complementarity, and the need for contacts between different elements in society is emphasised by, among others, Diakonia. It arranges regular round-table sessions with all its partners in a country, in order to get the different groups to meet and to exchange analyses, ideas and experiences.

Enhanced participation in Cambodia through the Seila³⁰/CARERE³¹ programme

Seila is a programme of the Cambodian Government, supported by multi- and bilateral donors through the CARERE project³², with the aim to reduce poverty and achieve reconciliation through decentralised good governance. The key method is to establish “rural development structures”, where villages are linked to the national level and given a real opportunity at influencing development investments in their area. They identify their local needs through a “local planning process”, which then determines the allocation of development resources partly provided through CARERE. *Seila*/CARERE has been a pilot programme in five provinces since 1996.

At the commune and village level, people have increasingly come to accept *Seila*, as the programme proves its ability to deliver infrastructure and services. Through their participation and contributions in cash and kind, villagers develop a growing sense of ownership in the programme and the facilities delivered. At the provincial and district level, government officials as well as NGOs seem to accept and appreciate the programme, while this is less so at the national level. This might be because the *Seila* programme is still relatively new, as is the debate on decentralisation and deconcentration in Cambodia.

The success of *Seila* in capacity building at the local level evidently results from a finely tuned and strategically focused process, where the key has been “learning by doing”. This has required substantial funds for both capacity building and development activities. Sida has supported CARERE through UNDP since 1994 by over SEK 140 million.

4.2.3 Training in Human Rights and Democracy

General training in human rights issues and democracy such as, for example, voter training and civic education, is another important area for support. It can be directed at policy makers, social workers, teachers etc., with the aim of influencing present and future policies, and at ordinary people in order to strengthen their knowledge about their rights. Children and young people are crucial target groups in strengthening democratic behaviour and thinking from early years. (See also 4.4.3.)

4.2.4 Keeping an Eye on Relevant Legislation

Support to *legislation* that affects participation, the media, civil society and other related issues is seen as another important field for Sweden to support. The support should be provided simultaneously and in parallel – to governments at the national level – and through non-governmental organisations which may influence legislation.

³⁰ A *khmer* word for approx. “foundation stone”.

³¹ Cambodian Area Rehabilitation and Regeneration Project.

³² Administrated by UNDP.

Sweden supports the “Popular Participation Law” in Bolivia that is a good example of a process where these different levels are involved. The law not only entails decentralisation to municipalities, it also establishes a basis for the conduct of governments and the exercise of democratic citizenship. It does so by recognising a range of organisations representing the whole population of a given rural community or urban neighbourhood, and by giving them a role in guiding and overseeing the conduct of municipal governments.

Consultation with children on The Child Justice Bill in South Africa

In South Africa, children have been consulted on their views of The Child Justice Bill, which seeks to create a comprehensive child justice system for children accused of offences. A study with the aim of asking children about their views was conducted. Groups of children were selected from among children in diversion programmes, children over the age of 14 awaiting trial in a safe place, children under the age of 14 awaiting trial in a safe place, children awaiting trial in prison, children serving a sentence in a reformatory, children serving a sentence in prison, and a group of grade nine learners who had never been in trouble with the law.

Participation in the study was voluntary and workshops were organised with the various groups of children. The methods used were role-play, small-group discussions and individually written feedback. The study showed that parents, lawyers and citizens had failed in understanding the children. It also showed that if children are treated with dignity and respect they will respond in a way that is rational, compassionate, sensible and imaginative.

Children made comments on the inadequacy of human rights education, abuse at the hands of the police and shady tactics by lawyers. The views of the children are included in the report to the South African Law Commission. This is an example of co-operation between civil society and the national government.

4.2.5 What are Ways to Support Participation by Marginalised Groups?

The inclusion of excluded or marginalised groups is acknowledged by all the Swedish embassies and NGOs and is addressed as a very important issue. But many of them stress that it is no easy thing to achieve real, effective inclusion and to strengthen these groups.

One strategy is to *seek to convince the government* to develop programmes and laws to encourage or assist marginalised groups, which also includes legislation. It may seem that this is a less promising approach than direct support to marginalised people and groups. But *direct support* may only reach a small proportion of such people and groups. If a government can be persuaded to introduce new laws or policies that benefit such groups, changes are likely to occur throughout the country, so that all marginalised groups have a chance to make at least modest gains. New legislation, that gives marginalised groups more space, encouragement, and perhaps resources with which to assert themselves, may improve things for all such groups.

Local courthouses in Nicaragua

Since 1993 Sida has supported the judicial system in Nicaragua, by the construction of local courthouses in the rural municipalities. Up to 1999, Swedish support had funded 122 courthouses. The local courts constitute the lowest of the four levels of jurisdiction. The local courts hear civil and criminal cases of lesser magnitude.

In a recent evaluation, the project's effects on access to justice was analysed. It seems to have contributed to enhanced visibility and status of the judicial system in rural communities and the prestige and competence of local judges. The judge can act more independently from the mayor, having his/her own housing and office space. Furthermore, professional qualifications have improved significantly, since 90% of the judges now have a law degree.

A side-effect of this kind of project is the presence of a public authority in rural areas. The courthouse functions as a focal point not only for justice, but also represents the presence of public authority. Examples show the importance of those courthouses in relation to, for example, elections. The building also serves as a centre for non-governmental activities aimed at increasing the public's knowledge about their rights and obligations according to the law.

In some rural areas, where the courthouse is the only representative of the state, it is assumed to have a positive impact on people's relation to public authorities. Some judges also work in favour of the community on more general terms within school activities, disaster relief and civic and judicial commissions. Good examples on how the judge can work closely with the community is within the Commissions of Peace in the most conflict-ridden and violent areas of Nicaragua, promoted by the OAS. The local judge is often chairman of the peace commission and the courthouse serves as the meeting point.

The precise mixture of strategies to be used will depend on the specific contexts in which the donor is operating. The conditions of marginalised groups vary greatly from country to country. So do attitudes towards the marginalised in the minds of powerful elements within civil society – they may be hostile, mildly sympathetic, or neutral. The views of governments as well as of the elites within them vary again from case to case.³³ All of this implies that decisions about which strategies to pursue must be based on an understanding of the specific context – although some mixture of strategies usually makes sense. As the Swedish Co-operative Centre (Utan Gränser) has argued:

...In some countries it is appropriate to directly support, for example, women's groups, sometimes it is best to support advocacy groups representing women, while other times support for mainstreaming activities is more appropriate. Often, a combination of these methods has a positive impact because they complement each other.

4.3 Civil Society's Ways to Enhance Participation – or not?

4.3.1 Membership-base of Civil Society Organisations

As noted above, the nature of civil society differs widely from country to country, depending on the laws and regulations that set the rules for organisations and on socio-economic conditions. Civil society is also strongly influenced by the history of a country

³³ For examples of studies of elite perceptions of poor, marginalised groups, see the section on “National Elites and Poverty” in *IDS Bulletin*, April 1999.

and by peoples' perception of organisations based on the historical context, and their interest and willingness to participate in organisational work, based on that perception. In some former communist countries, for example, where participation in organisations and the party was forced upon the people, people today are often reluctant to join major organisations, as the memory of the enforced participation remains.

We also find significant differences between countries in the degree to which poorer, socially excluded groups are organised for the pursuit of their own interests. This is explained partly by historical experiences and partly by the socio-economic conditions that exist in various countries. There is evidence from studies of decentralisation and civil society to suggest that poorer groups in Latin America are better organised for political action, and more politically aware and assertive, than are their counterparts in most of Africa and Asia.³⁴ It is important that we pay attention to this issue in any single country, so that strategies for assisting the poor are realistic.

4.3.2 Urban and Rural-based Civil Society Organisations Differ

When looking at the pattern of organisations in developing countries, it is clear that the majority, regardless of their type or size, are to be found within capitals or bigger cities. It is common for *these organisations to attract almost all external support*. Support to organisations outside major urban centres is often a question of capacity within the donor agency, as it is more demanding entering into and following up on partnerships with such organisations, especially in rural areas. It is also generally argued that as advocacy groups, locally based organisations quite often lack the power to exert influence on a national level.

While well-educated members from the middle or upper classes often dominate city-based organisations, *local organisations tend to include people from a wider range of social groups*. The type of members' organisation basically determines the kinds of people who are mobilised. It also determines the degree to which members are permitted to participate. Some rural organisations are more like co-operatives, formed to address common practical issues of the members who are highly involved in their activities. Others are mass organisations, where the individual member is relatively anonymous and thus not so actively involved.

Some social groups are seldom involved in organisations. Poor people or other disadvantaged or marginalised groups – who would profit immensely from the empowerment that can come with belonging to an organisation – are often not engaged. These excluded groups often participate in far greater numbers in elections, where all individuals are important, irrespective of their social status or the money that they have. Indeed, in some and perhaps many less developed countries, voter turnout is higher among poor people than among more prosperous groups. This has been shown to be true in India and South Africa³⁵, and the trend may extend to numerous other countries.

Several different strategies need to be pursued at the same time. Support should be given to *specialised NGOs* that work for the rights of a specific group. These kinds of organisations, however, often tend to represent, rather than to promote active participation, and thus reinforce the marginalisation of individuals or groups.

³⁴ See also, J. Manor, *The Political Economy of Democratic Decentralization* (Washington, The World Bank, 1999) pp 106–07.

³⁵ This is based on research by Yogendra Yadav and James Manor.

A second approach is to provide support directly to a *specific remote geographic region* or to a *specific marginalised group or minority*. Save the Children–Sweden, in its work to support children’s participation during the 1990s, has gradually expanded from support to specific child participation projects such as child parliaments, school councils, and school clubs, to mainstreaming of participation, which means encouraging participation of children in all programmes that they support. This has meant working with the attitudes of the staff both in Save the Children–Sweden and in partner organisations in developing countries. In programmes of advocacy, research or capacity building, they have seen that it is important to:

- Make the children visible to all planners,
- Conduct child impact assessments,
- Identify what children can contribute in the process.

The experience of Save the Children–Sweden also shows that girls are less likely to participate than boys are, and children with disabilities are often excluded from participation unless special measures are taken for their inclusion. They have also experienced that work for the participation of children can threaten adults and challenge their power.

4.3.3 Civil Society Organisations are often Undemocratic

Democratic culture is not a given, even in participatory organisations. Even when the purpose and intentions of an organisation are democratic and just, and even if the main focus is advocacy for justice and equality, the internal structure might still be influenced by non-democratic values. This is often the case in societies that have a strong patriarchal culture, or in small organisations, that operate like a family business. Thus, if an organisation is to foster democratic values among its members, it is sometimes necessary, and always useful, for it to have this as a certain component within its programme and for donors to bring the question to their attention.

4.3.4 Different Roles for Civil Society’s Participation

We have already noted that civic organisations can play many different roles – representation, mobilisation, advocacy, service delivery, etc. When an organisation develops a partnership with government to assist with service delivery using public funds, the degree of democratic space can influence the ability of the organisation to carry out advocacy work. Service delivery organisations often produce useful benefits for the people, and can make governments more willing to treat civil society sympathetically. But it indicates the need for differentiation and a division of labour within civil society, so that some groups develop partnerships while others engage in advocacy and other tasks.

Civil society organisations can also act as innovators and show governments new methods for participation.

4.3.5 Finances have “Ownership” Implications

To claim that civil society organisations make the deepest contribution to democracy when financed by support from the population is hard to prove, since few organisations are able to cultivate a solid financial base. The reason for this is the overall poverty of the people, which makes it difficult for organisations to collect membership fees. Since

organisations often have little or no financial support from their members, most are heavily dependent on external support from donors. One exception to this is trade unions, which usually have a financially stronger members' base, among employees. In a few cases, mass organisations and religious organisations also manage to attract substantial contributions from members.

As it is strongly believed among donors that active participation will most likely be stronger if members have a sense of ownership of the organisation, donors often try to encourage organisations to collect fees from members, even if these are only symbolic contributions. Some even argue that it is sometimes worth considering a *decrease* in donor support, if that would give incentives to the organisation for active fundraising among members. In this context, it is important to note that offering new support to an organisation may take away incentives to collect fees from members. Note, however, that voluntary work by members can make an important contribution to an organisation, and can give members a feeling of ownership. Yet it has also been observed that donor funding may cause both voluntary work and other forms of participation to decrease.

The term non-profit organisation is often used in relation to the criteria for support to a non-governmental organisation. This term is, however, relative, since salaries in these organisations can be much higher than in most other jobs in developing countries. This "brain-drain", where non-governmental organisations attract qualified people from government institutions by offering higher salaries, is valid for drivers and secretaries as well as for directors and civil servants.

A final observation that one must not forget, is that some organisations tend to change the objectives of their work according to the demands of the donor community; thus the aim to attract donor support becomes their main reason for being. An entrepreneurial spirit among leaders of organisations can be constructive, if it contributes to the effectiveness of an organisation. When it is mainly directed at profit-making or at leaders' self-promotion it is, however, seldom a creative force.

4.4 Dialogue, Media and Capacity-building in Promotion of Enhanced Participation

4.4.1 The Crucial Role of Constructive Dialogue

Policy dialogue is yet another important field. Experience shows a need for an active and increased dialogue by donors with the governments about issues related to participation and the role of civil society, as a complement to project support. In countries where there is a lack of political will to open up opportunities for the people to participate in decisions that affect their lives, policy dialogue between donors and governments can help to make a start. In order to have an effective and positive dialogue, the process must be built on mutual confidence and trust. Dialogue also takes time. Policy dialogue should not be limited to the governmental level; this should also be a meaningful component when supporting a non-governmental organisation. Here the Swedish NGOs play an active role. Furthermore, exchanges of ideas and views through meetings, discussions and contacts with international actors is as important for the administration as for civil society.

4.4.2 The Role of Communication and Media

One element of civil society that is increasingly seen as crucial is the *media* – in countries where governments do not exercise full control. In many cases, efforts to strengthen the media as a forum for discussion and dialogue are a useful way to foster both participation and a democratic culture. *Radio broadcasting* should not be ignored here – not least because it can reach large numbers of people in remote areas.

'National Issues Forum', by the Centre for Social Development in Cambodia

The Centre for Social Development, or CSD, was established in 1995 to promote democratic values and improve the value of life of the Cambodian people. It carries out practical research, training, advocacy, awareness raising and public debate. One of its key activities is to conduct public debates on issues of national importance – so-called National Issues Fora. Women especially are encouraged to participate in these Fora to make their voices heard.

For example, the increasing trafficking in women and children has been debated, with the purpose of raising men's awareness of the problem of prostitution and to call on the authorities and politicians to pay attention to this problem. That meeting took place in Battambang, where a lot of trafficking of women is done across the nearby border to Thailand. Another topic has been corruption. It is, for example, the general opinion that women are better at managing household finances; maybe such discussions will encourage women to apply for economic positions, thus increasing gender equality and potentially also contributing to more transparency in society.

Through Diakonia, Sida began funding CSD in 1997 when the National Issues Fora were started. Organised in Phnom Penh and three other Cambodian provinces, these meetings draw more and more participants. They are filmed and taped, and then distributed through TV and radio to other provinces, estimated to reach an audience of over 10,000 per Forum. Nine public fora are being held during 2001.

4.4.3 Training Needs in Human Rights and Democratic Practices

If state actors, institutions and civil society organisations are to stimulate participation, they need to be trained and exposed to new and democratic ideas. This is the experience of Forum Syd, a Swedish umbrella organisation of Swedish non-governmental organisations that channels Sida funds to Swedish NGOs which work with support to local NGOs in developing countries. During the 1990s it has become more important for Forum Syd and its member organisations to provide training in internal democracy for partner organisations. Thus the NGOs need *training* in democratic management, leadership, economic management, planning, administration and participatory methods. When democratisation gives elected representatives new powers, training programmes are important and can be a useful support to help those representatives and government bureaucrats to work together. They are often suspicious of one another, and need to be convinced that mutual respect and co-operation can improve development outcomes. The same is true in cases where NGO representatives are drawn into the design and implementation of policy.

4.4.4 Promoting Networks Which Channel Participation

In order to empower people to be able to voice their concerns, and to strengthen co-operation and trust between groups, support for the creation or development of *networks* is important. The Swedish Co-operative Centre (Utan Gränser), for example, focuses on (i) the strengthening of networks through the empowerment of individual members of co-

operative associations, (ii) the build-up and strengthening of those associations and (iii) the empowerment of such organisations to advance their concerns in relation to the government. Neighbourhood networks in the Nicaraguan case, where citizens meet representatives from the municipalities and the police, is yet another example.

4.5 What Kind of Support is Less Suitable with Regard to Participation?

One area that has to be handled with caution, is support to organisations working with service delivery. Since service delivery is essentially the responsibility of the state, it is important that donors do not encourage and strengthen organisations to take over this role in ways that give the government no incentive to build up its own capacity as the supplier of services. Even if the state assumes the responsibility, it might still risk the creation of a parallel structure.

In some countries, however, opportunities exist for *genuine* partnerships between governments and civic organisations in service delivery. When that is true, it may be worth supporting such initiatives. They can help to persuade people in government to be more tolerant of civil society, to provide more space for it, and to interact more constructively with it. Civic organisations can sometimes help governments to make better use of their resources.

There are three dangers in pursuing this approach, which donors must watch closely. Firstly, by entering into such partnerships, civil society organisations may merely pop up and legitimise a regime which is, for the most part, undemocratic. Secondly, such partnerships may be manipulated by politicians to co-opt and thus control civic associations. Thirdly, when civil society organisations become involved in service delivery, they usually find it difficult to continue important advocacy work, because it may offend a government that is providing resources for service delivery. If other civic associations remain aloof from service delivery, they may do enough advocacy work to justify decisions by some organisations to form partnerships with a government. That can produce creative diversification within civil society.

Many also argue that support to political parties should be taken with care or even avoided, as political parties often are elitist, corrupt and based on self-interest, instead of being participatory. Support to political parties might also impede the emergence of a new youthful leadership by pushing young people into the mainstream where they must conform or else be marginalised. If, however, decentralisation creates many new elected posts for young people at lower levels, donors might consider giving the kind of support to political parties which would enhance the capacity of these newcomers to assert themselves. The small, independent power bases that decentralised bodies provide for such newcomers often enable them to promote renewal within parties and within politics more generally.

There are also countries where there are no strong organisations other than those affiliated to political parties. In such cases, support to these kinds of organisations can help to foster change.

5 Conclusions for Promoting Participation

To promote participation, three areas for Swedish development co-operation can be identified:

1. support to *the government* to promote participation,
2. support to *organisations in civil society* that can promote participation and interaction between civil society and the state,
3. dialogue with government officials and civil society on participation.

5.1 Important Issues to Bear in Mind when Supporting Participation

- *Participation as a process*

The relationship between the state and its people is a continuously developing process. When participation increases, the results are often untidy and unpredictable. It is necessary for people in Sida and in the government to be patient with the untidiness, and trust the process to produce outcomes. Such outcomes do not only reflect the views of powerful sections of society but conform more fully to the preferences of the people who are supposed to benefit from the services of the state.

- *Participation is context specific*

Participation is dependent on the economic, political, social and cultural context of a specific country or region. It depends on the degree of empowerment of people, their interest in transforming the state and making use of the space given by the state at national and local level for direct and indirect participation. It is also dependent on the power structures in society and in civil society. Support to participation must, therefore, build on an analysis of these factors. That leads to different strategies in different countries. The power structures is one factor that should be better reflected in Sida's country analyses.

- *Parallel support to participation at different levels in society should be considered*

The different levels of society; state and civil society, need to meet if more effective and open relations between the two are to be developed. Thus support to civil society organisations should preferably be complemented by support to and/or dialogue with the central and municipal administration.

- *Participation can be defined by different degrees*

Participation in relation to the actions and decisions of the state can be defined by different degrees. The lowest and first degree of participation is to be informed; the second, to be consulted regarding limited issues; the third, to influence major decisions; and, finally, to share decisions through, for example, a popular vote. Support could be directed to any of these degrees of participation.

- *Inequality, intolerance or conflict can make inclusive participation difficult*

Serious inequality, intolerance or conflicts can make it difficult to develop widely inclusive participation – and participation can take destructive forms. In such circumstances, democratisation at national or lower levels may also assume destructive forms, although democracy tends to moderate conflict. The challenge is then to promote pluralism in civil

society, to work against alienation, and to prevent exclusion of groups from such mechanisms that promote direct and indirect democracy.

5.2 Support the Government to Promote Increased Participation

a) Strengthen participatory and inclusive mechanisms (that enhance people's motivation for and trust in participation)

- *Support to participatory, transparent and accountable mechanisms in national government institutions can include support to:*
- Develop laws, policies and procedures that encourage people's direct and indirect participation;
- Encourage governments to make changes in laws and policies that will foster gender equity;
- Increase access to information on government budgets and political decisions and their effects on various groups in society, preferably through legislation and regulations;
- Increase the awareness of the situation of the people through statistics, surveys and research;
- Promote space for participation of civil society in reforms of health, education and other sectors;
- Increase knowledge on human rights including the rights of the child and the rights of women and people with disabilities among government decision makers at national and local levels;
- Increase awareness of democratic principles through e.g. voter and civic education.

b) Support decentralisation initiatives

- *Resources, accountability and legitimacy are needed for successful decentralisation*

Decentralisation can promote participation. Before making the decision to support decentralisation, it is important to analyse to what extent the government devolves sufficient powers and funds to decentralised bodies, if accountability mechanisms are put in place, and if the participatory mechanisms are truly inclusive and legitimised by the people, since that is what enables such bodies to work well and be genuinely democratic.

- *Representative democracy stimulates participation*

Representative democracy stimulates increased participation-not only campaigning and voting in relation to elections, but also activity in association, and contacting and lobbying elected representatives and bureaucrats between elections.

- *Direct participation increases effectiveness of services and ensure demand driven policies*

People's direct participation at local level can ensure userfriendly services and informed demand driven policies. Children's participation in i.e children's parliaments and special consultations are important for child and youth impact assessment. Such consultations ensure that policies and programmes are based on the assessment of the situation by the users of services and can guarantee implementation with and not for people including young people and children.

- *Beware of technocratic overload*

Partner country bureaucrats may be overloaded with complex assignments. This danger is especially great when dealing with people who operate at lower levels in political systems. Sida needs to be realistically cautious about this and to minimise complexity.

- *Support to training in human rights and participation should be considered*

In support to decentralisation, Sida should consider the inclusion of training of decision-makers at local level in human rights, the right to participate, and in mechanisms for participation.

c) Strengthen government mechanisms for participation of excluded groups

Development assistance can support the establishment of mechanisms for inclusive participation:

- *Reservation of seats for women*

When decentralisation entails the creation of elected bodies at lower levels in political systems, women often have difficulty in winning seats and in making their voices heard once they occupy seats. The best strategy for tackling the first problem is to reserve a proportion of seats for women. For the second problem, there is some utility in allowing women to congregate on a single committee, since this enables them to develop confidence and a sense of solidarity.

- *Mechanisms to encourage participation of people with disabilities*

People with disabilities need to be encouraged to vote and participate in various activities where they can influence decision making.

- *Alternative ways to collect the views of children and adolescents*

Children and adolescents under 18 years are not allowed to vote in most countries. The views of children under the voting age, therefore, need to be collected by alternative ways through, e.g., consultations, child and youth parliaments, opinion polls and specific surveys.

5.3 Promote Participation through Support to Civil Society

a) Improved analysis of civil society

- *The role and function of civil society in relation to participation should be analysed*

Sida's promotion of participation through non-governmental organisations should build on extensive analysis of the role of civil society in a specific country, the roles played by specific groups of organisations and specific organisations in relation to the promotion of participation as well as the relationship with other organisations and the state. The analysis of civil society is preferably done together with other donors and as part of a country analysis.

The analysis might show that organisations that are involved in agriculture, land rights and health, for instance, are sometimes more successful in promoting and generating space for participation than traditional lobby organisations based in the cities. The importance is not whether the organisation is involved in human rights monitoring or health, but if it has the function of a promoter of true and inclusive participation.

- *Power structures, problems and conflicts in civil society in relation to participation should be analysed*

Problems within civil society can undermine its creativity and impede participation.

Prosperous groups may pursue their own interests aggressively. Traditional leaders may preside over stifling hierarchies. Sida, therefore, needs to understand the power and inclinations of elites before making policy choices. An analysis of civil society, therefore, needs to identify power structures, problems and conflicts, and development agents in civil society from the perspective of promoting participation.

- *Poverty, gender and age perspectives are needed in the analysis*

The analysis also needs a poverty, gender and age perspective. The analysis should help to identify how capable disadvantaged groups are of pursuing their own interests: Are disadvantaged groups politically aware, politically skilled, and self-confident? Do they have allies, in other social groups or in government, that might assist them? The answers to these questions can help to shape Sida's strategy in a country.

b) Support initiatives that promote empowerment of disadvantaged groups

- *Decide whether to emphasise direct or indirect support to disadvantaged groups*

Both strategies are useful, and some mixture of the two is usually advisable. If the analysis shows that disadvantaged groups largely lack capacity to pursue their own interests, then greater effort should probably be made to direct assistance to such groups.

- *Support to the empowerment of excluded groups as a part of promoting participation*

Organisations such as service delivery organisations, human rights organisations, and policy organisations that work to empower certain excluded groups, can also play an important role in promoting participation and expanding the space for influence. Their actions will be different if they see their role as strengthening the state rather than as transforming the state in a participatory way, and it is the latter that Sida should support.

- *Gender bias within organisations*

In tackling gender bias within organisations, there are several methods of bringing the diverse perspectives of women within organisations to the surface. For example, working with powerful groups to promote dialogue for new work practices merits attention. It may also be useful to support important firms in the private sector and for large non-governmental organisations to undertake well-publicised efforts to promote gender equity, beyond as well as within their organisations.

5.4 Promote Participation through Dialogue

a) Direct dialogue with government

Sida can also pursue dialogue with high-level figures in governments to show that greater participation, decentralisation and a vibrant civil society are in their interests. Short-term loss of influence is usually more than matched by the long-term political gains that will result. Many of these reforms can win popular acclaim without costing much. This has had powerful appeal in some countries. However, it is important that we bear in mind that participation is a question of changing the balance of power.

b) South-south co-operation

If a donor wishes to persuade important actors to try a new strategy or policy that can enhance participation, it may help to develop a dialogue between similar types of people

from different countries – bureaucrats with bureaucrats, politicians with politicians, etc. This approach can be used not only with senior politicians and bureaucrats in governments, but also with elected representatives at lower levels, and the leaders of civil society organisations.

6 Issues to be Studied Further

- *How well equipped are poorer groups to pursue their own interests in different countries?* We noted in Section 5.2 above that there are significant variations between countries in the capacity of poorer groups to pursue their own interests. There is a need for further study of these variations – both in general and within individual countries where donor representatives need to understand this important variable.
- *The participation of children and youth.*
- *The participation of individuals with disabilities.*

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Web Sites

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- 2) www.worldbank.org/poverty/wdrpoverty/conspeer/global.htm#Summary
- 3) www.worldbank.org/poverty/wdrpoverty/conspeer/national.htm
- 4) www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/index.htm
- 5) www.ids.ac.uk/ids/socpol/spconf/drafts.htm

Interviews

Diakonia.

Save the Children-Sweden – Rädda Barnen.

The Swedish Co-operative Centre – Utan Gränser.

The Swedish NGO Centre for Development Co-operation – Forum Syd.

Annex 1

Questionnaire for Embassy Consultations on “Citizen’s Participation” (Medborgerligt deltagande)

Background

The Division for Democratic Governance (DESA) at Sida is responsible for Sida’s support to democracy and human rights. Four thematic projects are currently being carried out by DESA in order to further develop an understanding of the role of international assistance in the development of democratic governance. One focuses specifically on the relationship between state and society/the individual with regard to participation. The main focus will be on the political process, including both the decision-making process and the implementation of decisions through the public administration. Regarding the various actors in civil society, the study will focus on organisations or citizen groups which work to influence the political processes and decision making.

Objective

The main objective is to summarise the current literature on this topic and the experiences of Swedish NGO-partners, Sida departments and embassies in relation to “citizens’ participation”. The conclusions will be presented in a “working paper” by 30 September and form the basis for the further development of Sida’s policy on support for democratic governance.

DESA hereby asks the Embassy to reply to the following questionnaire. In particular DESA would like information on projects and experiences the Embassy has with regard to supporting civil society and people’s participation in decision making in your country. The focus should be on the interface between state and civil society/the individual, i.e.

What kinds of democratic interaction between the individual/civil society and the state can be supported by Sweden?

Taking this question as a point of departure, we would like you to discuss your practical experiences and reflections/ideas on potential methods. The issues raised are not mutually exclusive. Still, we would appreciate it if you could write down a few thoughts on each one (maximum 1 page per issue, total maximum 4 pages), to help us summarise the input from the embassies.

Issues

- 1) Various researchers who studied projects of assistance to civil society in support of democratisation are claiming that donors target such assistance largely at “civic” or “advocacy” NGOs, principally in the main cities, which to a large degree work for promoting human rights, election observation, voter education and anti-corruption issues. These organisations play an important role by “counter-balancing” the ruling government/ regime/ president. *To what extent would you say this is true also for your country (in general but also for Sida-supported NGOs)? What specific method(s) or specialised issues are most common among these “advocacy” groups (land rights, elections, children’s rights etc.)?*

- 2) On the other hand, researcher and activist Larry Diamond, also editor for “Journal of Democracy”, is claiming that:

Without question, civil society makes its deepest, most organic, and most sustainable contribution to democracy when it cultivates a significant base of financial support among a broad and indigenous constituency.

On the basis of your experience, is this statement correct? What kinds of civil society organisations exist in your country which “cultivate a significant base” as above? Does the Swedish democracy and human rights assistance in your country promote these kinds of organisations? Should we promote these kinds of organisations and if so, how can we do that?

- 3) Sida defines, in its programme for Peace, Democracy and Human Rights, democracy along two dimensions. The first concerns democratic elections/institutions and civil and political rights, the other, “societal democracy”, which is concerned with democratic culture and values including tolerance, willingness to compromise, and participation. The programme also claims that these can only develop where an active civil society exists, providing fertile ground and nourishment. *In your opinion, what types of support are most suited to promote the development of societal democracy and democratic culture in your country?*

- 4) The debate on “empowerment,” a “rights-based approach” to development, and “popular participation” has intensified in the 1990s and also increasingly converged. The DAC group of the OECD countries established a working group on “participatory development and good governance” to discuss among donors how interaction between the state and its people can be supported. The World Bank’s “World Development Report” of 1997 talks of “bridging the gap between state and citizen”.

But how is it done? There seem to be processes in many countries of such “bridging:” local development projects, often supported by NGOs, that have had success thanks to participatory approaches in planning and implementation and are being “scaled-up” and replicated on a sector level within government structures; or efforts at decentralisation or “devolution”, to move decision making closer to the citizens and thus improve their participation. *What trends can be observed in your country? In your experience, what kind of “bridging”, and on what levels (central, province, district, local, rural/cities), tend to be most promising as a promoter of real democratic participation? What obstacles can you find for such interaction? On what level (central, provincial, local) do you think the most effective ways or opportunities for interaction are?*

- 5) Participation is central from a developmental perspective for several reasons. Not only is it a goal in itself. It gives the individual the opportunity to control his or her own life. It is of utmost importance that all individuals including children & adolescents, women, minorities and other groups so often marginalised have the right to participate and exert an influence. *Based on your experiences, are there certain methods that have proven to be less/more effective in promoting participation, not least of specific groups? (Direct support to the group concerned? “Advocacy” groups acting on behalf of the group concerned? Or any other forms of representation for the group concerned?)*

- 6) It is often assumed that increased political participation will come through greater activity in civil society and through political parties. At the same time we know that civil society and political parties in many countries are weak and often not representative of all citizens. Therefore, *do you have experiences from Government initiatives to strengthen participation of citizens, not least those that often stand without representation through organisations, e.g. poor people, unemployed in cities, minorities, women, children? In your opinion, what can be done to strengthen the capacity of state actors and institutions to stimulate such participation?*
- 7) However important citizens' participation might be to development, there are areas and processes where donors' assistance is not suitable or might even be negative from a developmental point of view. With a strong NGO community, there is a risk that the NGOs fill the gap of a non-functioning government so effectively that the government doesn't take or accept the responsibility for service delivery by the state. Another problem might be that civil servants leave their posts within the state, to work for higher salaries offered by NGOs, financed by foreign aid. *Based on your experiences, what processes and/or areas are not suitable for involvement by international donors?*
- 8) *Based on your observations from experiences in your country, what, in your opinion, should be the focus and strategy of Sweden in supporting citizen participation and interaction between state and society – i.e. where are our comparative advantages; what can and should Sweden do?*

Halving poverty by 2015 is one of the greatest challenges of our time, requiring cooperation and sustainability. The partner countries are responsible for their own development. Sida provides resources and develops knowledge and expertise, making the world a richer place.



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