

# **International NGOs as Global Civil Society Agents in Foreign Aid Policy: The Unfulfilled Promise of Participatory Policy Making**

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## **Abstract**

In the late 1990s significant work emerged analysing the impact of transnational advocacy networks on official aid donor agendas. These studies added several new elements to the burgeoning global civil society literature. First, they highlighted the role played by non-state actors in the realm of foreign aid and development policy. Second, and as a result of their employment of network metaphors in defining global civil society, they drew attention to the position occupied by International NGOs (INGOs) as important intermediaries between local civil society groups and official donor agencies. It was in this context that debate turned to the nature of INGO engagement with official donors and the possibility of official development policy becoming increasingly participatory. One possibility flagged at the time was that INGOs might become key players in foreign aid policy ‘sub-systems’, with their interaction with official agencies occurring via operational and policy ‘partnerships’. Official donors themselves began to employ the rhetoric of partnership to describe their relationships with developing states, the private sector, and also global and local civil society.

The meaning of ‘partnership’, as used by donors, INGOs, and analysts alike, was never clearly defined. Ten years on, there is still uncertainty on this point. There remains much that is unknown about how INGOs interact with and influence local civil society groups and governments and multilateral agencies. There is also still an absence of detailed analysis into whether international network-oriented relationships are partnerships, alliances, collaborations, ‘managed networks’ or simply forms of cooption disguised by participatory rhetoric. This has implications for informed debate over participatory policy making.

The first goal of this paper is to arrive at a sharper definition of ‘partnership’ by bringing literature on networks and partnerships across from policy studies and into the

discussion on global civil society as it relates to international development. This definition is then compared against the public statements on 'partnership' made by official aid donors and INGOs in an attempt to determine the true character of that concept as it is used by these actors. A finding is made on the degree to which it equates with a more deliberative, participatory approach toward official development policy formation.

The second goal is to assess what sort of relationships have, in practice, evolved over the past decade between INGOs and both local civil society groups and official donors, and, again, what interpretation of 'partnership' they might match, and whether this has led to a more deliberative, participatory policy culture. In answering this, I examine the relationship between civil society groups and INGOs and the World Bank and Asian Development Bank in respect of community empowerment programs in Timor Leste and Indonesia.

The paper concludes that, when it comes to the openness of official donors to genuinely deliberative, participatory policy making, the hopes in that direction held ten years ago have been only marginally fulfilled.