Role of Civil Society CBOs/NGOs in Decentralized Governance

SHEILA GRANT, Local Initiative Facility for the Environment (LIFE), UNDP Jamaica

Introduction

MOST GROUPS, organizations, and institutions in society have an influence on, and are influenced by governance functions. There are three domains of governance—the state, the private sector, and civil society—which have particularly strong impacts on the achievement of sustainable development.

- Civil society has been described as the well-spring of social capital—the ability of people to work together for common purposes; this in turn, is integral to good governance.

- The state may be described as an administrative and political institution which has legitimate authority and responsibility over its citizens.

- The term private sector refers to all other institutions which are privately owned, and operated based on the profit motive. They are involved in production, distribution, provision of goods and services) and practice governance in keeping with their mandate of profitability.

It is therefore important to examine, in greater detail, the roles of each domain in a partnership approach to governance.

This paper will focus on the role of civil society, and in particular, community-based organizations (CBOs) and non-government organizations (NGOs) in the promotion of decentralized governance.

Agenda of Decentralized Governance

Over the last ten (10) years a series of United Nations (UN) conferences including Rio and Istanbul have marked a global recognition of the long term benefits of participatory local governance which highlights the centrality of community participation to the delivery of sustainable development program. The distinguishing feature of this approach is a co-partnership (of state, civil society organization and private sector) in development and represents a fundamental development paradigm shift from a primarily state-led (top-down) approach. This approach to governance is aligned to a broader concept of participatory democracy.

Decentralization is defined as a multi-dimensional process of shifting the focus of development from central planning and bureaucratic government agencies to community-
based participatory systems that use the full range of local, public and private institutions (WB, n.d.). Decentralization, in contrast to centralization, is expected to affect the development of communities by:

• Empowering communities to make decisions on matters that affect their lives and to develop and strengthen capacities to manage their affairs;

• Providing communities with control over some fiscal resources to implement local development programs;

• Encouraging greater accountability at the local level by increasing the responsiveness of local institutions;

• Re-directing public goods and services to where they are most needed;

• Removing the need for central government agencies to implement all aspects of community development programs;

• Creating mechanism for communities to connect with service providers and regulatory bodies;

• Promoting integration of local action with national policy objectives and growth targets.

Local governance is viewed as the primary vehicle for effecting governance at all levels because it empowers local actors to steer their own development process and to design programs which reflect local moods, interests and capabilities of the people whose lives are directly affected (Urban Development, n.d.).

It is recognized that the approach is not only concerned with quantitative changes in the delivery of services, but is a fundamental shift in the practice of governance and is driven by the principles of transparency, social equity, social empowerment and accountability.

Decentralized governance thus becomes a strategy for achieving sustainable development and increasing the depth and breadth of the democratic process. The agenda of decentralized governance is aimed at creating enabling environments at the national and local levels for citizens, communities and private sector to jointly engage in growth strategies aimed at wealth creation and improvement in the quality of life and the agenda includes the following:

• Reduction in control over policy and decision-making by government and a corresponding increase in control by civil society;

• Shifting of problem-solving from an agency-centered towards a community-based definition;
CIVIL SOCIETY IN DECENTRALIZED GOVERNANCE

- A change in ownership of community development outcomes from state to community;
- Reduce reliance on government and increase self-sufficiency, moving from enablement to empowerment.

Benefits of a Decentralized System of Governance

- Gives civil society a sense of inclusion and a corresponding reduction in confrontational approach;
- Transfer of meaningful benefits to the people;
- A built-in sustainability into the development process—people see themselves as managing their own process;
- Contributes to social stability;
- Strengthens the democratic process;
- Increase in the potential for a broader span of development opportunities to be achieved as a broader cross-section of society is brought together for development;
- Integration of local action with national policy objectives and growth targets.

The major policy mechanism to operationalize decentralized governance are the reform of the local government system and the strengthening of Civil Society Organizations. In the case of Jamaica the Local Authority Act which provides the framework for the operations of the local government body dates back to 1887. It would be reasonable to say that to incorporate such a local government system into the new approach to governance is tantamount to prescribing a new developmental direction for local government operations. This will require a desocialization and a resocialization process through training and support systems for managing change, the success of which is dependent on the process capabilities to meet the demands of a participant democratic society.

Agenda of the Community Based Organization/ Non-Government Organizations (CBO/NGO)

These organizations for the most part, evolved in a very unstructured way in an environment where it was felt that the state had fallen down on its responsibilities. Individuals felt they had a responsibility to each other to develop their own system of a safety net; as such, these organizations were largely responsive to needs rather than pro-active and were driven by a spirit of volunteerism. These organizations have largely remained close to the needs of the people within a locality and or complementary to weak state driven programs of health, education and training and are usually managed by church and benevolent societies.
In more recent times these efforts have attracted development assistance as the international community recognized the ailing effects of Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) and government’s debt management process on the economy, evidenced in the increasing poverty on the population and increasing pressure on the environment. Recently, development assistance has enabled a broadening of the agenda of these organizations and to include human rights issues, community development, integration of women in development, advocacy and electoral matters which are representative of a wider spectrum of the technical and representational dimensions of governance.

These organizations were in most instances developed to the exclusion of political representatives and were recognized as autonomous bodies. CBOs can be a particularly important asset, in view of the features/attributes from which decentralized governance can benefit such as:

- Ability to innovate
- Direct relationship to the poor
- Capacity to stimulate participation and articulate local views
- Cost effective operations
- Responsive
- Autonomy which results in independent assessment of issues and problems
- Strong identification with concerns of the communities which they serve
- Volunteer driven

Their direct political value was overlooked for the most part given their informal and autonomous nature, and there was no concerted effort to integrate the process into the governance structure.

As a result of the lack of integration of CBOs, the pace of development of these organizations to meet the needs of a participant democratic society has been slow. The state and other mechanisms such as political parties have either prevented it from happening or neutralized their role by attempting to replace it by traditional patronage practices (this is done under the guise of presenting motions before the state on behalf of the population).

With the increasing inability of the state to assure a majority of its citizens access to avenues of human rights, justice, social equity, there has been a movement of community action groups to define their own approach to addressing these issues. New informal systems of settlement, community security, community enterprises and community support systems operating within a CBO framework are evolving as part of the force towards decentralization of governance, in order to incorporate community participation as a major emphasis in government development strategy and to recognize its worth. The increasing participation and growth has led to much reliance on their role in improvement of the quality of life at the local level. Community organizations have been credited with their ability to successfully engage communities in activities which have contributed in tangible ways to improving their living conditions through infrastructural improvement capacity building and institutional strengthening, examples of which are the Jamaican Case Studies of Cave Island Water Supply (see Box 1) and Portmore Gardens Drainage and Settlement Projects (see Box 3).
Box 1. Cave Island Case Study

The Cave Island case study is from a town center in a rural parish where the community became organized as a result of LIFE intervention. The organization has developed significantly since it started two and a half years ago.

Cave Island is an informal settlement within Falmouth, it was without running water at the time of LIFE’s intervention. The anticipated benefits of the project were to provide the 150 residents with access to water supply and improve the health and sanitation practices of the community.

Although the parish has a major watershed that provides enough water supply for the needs of the town, informal housing settlements have been without piped water and have depended mainly on rain water.

Residents came together to speak with a common voice to issues of water, sanitation and land; these issues were brought to the attention of the Mayor of the municipality. He had been lobbying to get water lines in the community but was unable to access funding. The community working in partnership with the Parish Council and the National Water Commission (NWC) who provided the technical specification expertise for the project, was able to access LIFE’s local facility funding window. The LIFE coordinator was instrumental in the community animation process around the issues and was able to broker an arrangement with the NWC, which improved the power relations and created an environment for dialogue and partnership. The project achieved the desired result of enabling the community to have water supply by utilizing resources realized by the community to complement those of the NWC and the municipality. The financial cost was largely the cost to procure the main lines.

The water supply problem faced by this community were overcome by the willingness of residents to participate in addressing their need once they became organized. Support from the Parish Council was valuable. The partnership approach was essential for the success of this project, as the resources to implement the project did not lay in any one group.

A factor that threatened to hinder the project was the initial reluctance of the NWC to engage with a community driven process. Lessons learnt were as follows:

- Building partnership relationships with public entities is shown as being critical in enabling communities to effect tangible improvements;
- Information sharing and increasing the capacity organization towards greater self-reliance can become important tools of engagement of community in community problem-solving;
- The contribution of the community animator to engage the community in local-local dialogue and community diagnosis process, laid the foundation for engagement of the partners in a participative and consultative process in the development of the project.
As a consequence of their activities, some expectations and roles have been ascribed to these organizations and include the following:

- Engagement of civil society/community in development concerns at the community level;
- Forging partnerships in the new development model;
- Social service delivery to supplement the shortfall of government, with emphasis on marginalized groups;
- Influencing public policy;
- Development of social capital at the community level;
- Protection and promotion of human rights issues;
- Engagement of the community in sustainable development issues.

Local Initiative Facility Funding window of donor agencies, funds under the Government Poverty Eradication Program and Environmental Control Programs represent the major instrument of funding such CBO initiatives.

Communities are also moving towards developing their own instruments for raising funds. In Jamaica, organizations have used the legal framework of the provident society, and are searching for an instrument to value community assets.

Community organizations have evidently made contribution of worth to the GDP, however their input is not quantifiable. Although the value of their services is recognized by the community, these organizations are marginalized by the operations of the formal sector, this is evidenced in their lack of responsiveness to recognize these groups as partners in development. CBOs continue to experience difficulty in accessing information, resources (inclusive of financial and technical assistance), and collaboration with the wider support system of governance. In recognition of this failure to incorporate communities in the partnership approach to governance, UNDP has piloted a LIFE program dubbed ‘An Innovative Approach to Participatory Local Governance’ in twelve countries with the aim of bringing more recognition to community participation and local governance.

**CBOs and NGOs Contribution to Decentralization**

The success of community participation can be measured by the capacity of citizens to engage in dialogue that results in joint action to resolve their concerns and sustain their development.

The true potential of civil organizations has not been recognized due to the fragmentation and lack of connection with government’s development targets. The high level of sectoral interest has reduced the collective impact of the CBO/NGO sector to the extent that their
Box 2. LIFE: An Innovative Approach to Participatory Local Governance

Through the Local Initiative Facility for Urban Environment (LIFE), UNDP has developed a methodology to promote participatory local governance using the urban environment as the entry point. The purpose of this methodology is to provide opportunities for CBOs, NGOs and local authorities to work together to improve the conditions of poor people living in urban areas. Program objectives include influencing policy at the local, provincial, national and international levels.

The LIFE Methodology

Upstream – conduct a national consultation, set strategies, gather support.
Downstream – ensure effective, collaborative small-scale policy experiments by CBOs, NGOs and local authorities.
Upstream – initiate policy dialogue through the dissemination and exchange of information nationally and internationally.

The LIFE Program has projects in twelve pilot countries. LIFE also supports national consultations, local-local dialogue, policy dialogue and networking at the country level. At the regional and interregional levels, LIFE funds projects by NGO networks and cities’ associations that promote the documentation of (and exchange information on) successful approaches to improving the urban environment. The LIFE Global Advisory Committee provides a forum for sharing experiences from the national, regional and interregional levels and synthesizing lessons learned.

LIFE seeks to influence the ways in which local people and organizations work together by demonstrating the benefits of cooperative planning and action. The shared experiences of establishing priorities, designing projects and programs, mobilizing resources, implementing plans and seeing results have inspired sustained local partnerships among those involved with the LIFE Program.

Source: UNDP

contribution is not measurable. Turfism has been the major deterrent to bridging the fragmentation and sectoral interest problem.

In more recent times there has been a movement towards CBOs wanting to see themselves as a sector contributing to the productive base of the economy through strategic alliance as a major strategy for sustainable livelihoods and poverty reduction.

In Jamaica CBO/NGOs have formed coalitions as follows:

- Peoples Action for Community Transformation (PACT) – focus on urban poor
• National Environmental Societies Trust (NEST) – address environmental issues
• Community Organization for Management and Development (COMAND) – to focus on development of marginalized communities
• Association of Development Agencies (ADA) – umbrella organization of development NGOs/CBOs

These represent efforts of focused and collaborative intervention by the CBO/NGO community. The coalitions also represent an attempt to distinguish agencies involved in more benevolent type of functions.

There is evidence of a need for a new engagement in which these organizations can be seen as an organized sector with the capacity to provide some leadership for civil society and to address the issues of poverty, social inequity, and injustice within the context of decentralized governance.

The reality is that given the range of activities of CBO/NGO type operations (including the churches), and given the sectoral and fragmentation concerns, the willingness to subsume individual interest to the larger interest of the sector becomes an increasing challenge. Without some mechanism to engage civil society’s participation, the likelihood of achieving the vision of sharing in a partnership approach (with government and the private sector) to development remains weak.

In Jamaica, the relationship between civil society and government in its widest sense, is one of the voluntary acceptance of the need to work together in particular instances, but there exists no policy, nor is it legislated that this is to occur. Much is always said about the need for this relationship, but it is not manifested in its execution. The areas where this relationship is most necessary are planning and policy formulation; in many instances this collaboration exists only in the planning phase for any particular project—the wider issues of policy and strategic planning are still the purview of the state. In reality, NGO/CBO involvement in the planning process is by virtue of their own reputation and competencies; the fact that they represent civil society organization is incidental. Civil society and municipality can work together in a collaborative effort; this has been seen at the level of project implementation and where there is a need for cooperation to resolve project related issues.

The process of decentralization is not driven by civil society; this raises concerns about its ability to operate in a non-partisan manner and to abandon features of imbalance in the power relations, which was a characteristic of the top-down model of development. There is obvious need for clear policy framework and a structure in which civil society can participate. These mechanisms for the inclusion of civil society’s participation must, of necessity, be developed in a consultative process, with the capacity to strengthen an approach to governance. This approach requires facilitation, co-existence, an enabling environment, responsiveness to government structures and piloting best practices in order to attain durability of the process.
Box 3. Portmore Gardens Drainage and Settlement Project

This project, located in a dormitory community adjoining the City of Kingston (Capital of Jamaica), was initially intended to enable the community to halt environmental degradation. The drain and bridge required by the community (to protect the environment) were ultimately executed by the government. The project was extended to include helping the community to acquire possession of the land on which the houses were built.

The Portmore Gardens community association has been active since 1977 which mission was largely focused on pursuing a course of action to own the property that was occupied without security of tenure. The residents decided to help themselves to develop their own community infrastructure as they did not feel assured of getting help from the government. The association’s first action was to pursue the matter of electricity service which required supporting ownership documents among others, for the request to be approved. Collaboration with the political representative and the association resulted in the provision of electricity and demonstrated the benefits of partnership and citizens’ participation.

The association then sought to secure water for the community; only a few homes were in receipt of piped water on a regular basis. The association lobbied the National Water Commission for years without success. The problem was later directed to the Parish Council which took corrective action in consultation with the association.

The roads in the community were upgraded by the association opting to accept more marl material in lieu of labor and the community providing the labor for fixing the roads.

The community engaged the Office of Disaster Preparedness, St. Catherine Parish Council, West Indies Home Contractors (Private Developers) and the member of Parliament, in consultation, included an on-site assessment of the project and ultimate replacement of the bridge.

The critical helping factor in the project achievement was identified as the presence of an organized community to sustain the process and facilitate the engagement.

The lessons learned from the participative and consultative approach have been evident. This approach helped to build interdependent relationships in the implementation phase of the project.

The dialogue and teamwork methodology helped to establish meetings between the community and the critical institutions which were previously unwilling to relate directly with them. The project demonstrated that Project Financing can be highly leveraged by the partnership approach.
Mechanisms for realizing this partnership potential are often weak or absent because:

- CBO/NGOs suffer threat from political representatives who think that the NGOs/CBOs are taking over their roles;
- Community organizations are not organized to collaborate with the local authority;
- There exists a need for coordinating the engagement of community; and
- The local authority will need additional financial and technical resources to complement community initiatives.

**Issues in Improving Complimentarity and Partnership of Civil Society’s Role in Decentralization**

- The need for a mechanism of coordinated engagement of civil society/NGO/CBO participation
- Reform of relations to address the existing power imbalance
- Revision of the legal and regulatory framework to ease the devolution of power from the center to the community; this may require legal entrenchment of local authority and the assignment of legal status to community representation groups
- Policy framework for CBO and NGO to give clear instructions on the mission and mandate
- Mechanism for development of a Social and Economic Agenda Program at the local level which allows for accountability through objective verifiable contribution to the growth targets
- Documentation of best practice and information interchange which will show communities that decentralization and community participation are intricately bound with the concept of sustainable development poverty reduction, social equity and justice
- Need for the development of methodology and instruments to value community assets
- Main-streaming of the UNDP LIFE methodology to influence the decentralization process commencing with country programs under the UN Agenda 21 contextual framework for poverty eradication and sustainable development.
CIVIL SOCIETY IN DECENTRALIZED GOVERNANCE

REFERENCES

United Nations Development Program (UNDP).  Governance and Democratic Development in Latin America and the Caribbean.
World Bank (no date).  Decentralization and Rural Development.  A paper published by the WB.