

Quality Engagement: Towards better working terms between Government and Civil Society

November 2006

Policy Forum

General Context:

While there have been instances where Government and civil society have worked together constructively, the relationship between the two sectors is more often characterized by mutual suspicion and antagonism. Government has validly criticized civil society for not being transparent, and for not always offering tangible solutions when it is critical of Government policy or practices. On its part civil society has often had to fight to be included in policy processes, and has on many instances been included in a superficial manner not intended to give it an opportunity for substantive input. Developing a binding agreement on the way in which these two sectors can engage with each other in a constructive manner can address these problems, and contribute to creating a healthy and beneficial working relationship between civil society in all its diversity and Government. In this note, we are guided by the Code of Good Practice on Policy Dialogue developed in Canada. The document is available at: http://www.vsi-isbc.ca/eng/policy/policy_code.cfm. Tanzania is about to undergo an African Peer Review Mechanism self-evaluation exercise on a national scale, and this could provide an excellent opportunity to address the possibility of an agreement between civil society and Government on quality engagement between the two sectors.

Elements of a possible Agreement:

At its core, an agreement or accord between civil society and Government in Tanzania will have the aim of enabling the two sectors to engage with each other to their *mutual benefit*. Government will be able to tap into civil society knowledge and expertise to enhance its policy formulation, and it will also be

able to increase the arena of participation on the part of citizens through their organizations. Civil society in turn will have an opportunity to provide information, to advocate and to advise government on public policy matters.

For this to happen, civil society will have to be included in policy process in a substantive manner:

- by getting invitations to important meetings and forum in time from government
- by having access to key documents and any relevant information in time for effective consultation and preparation for these meetings.
- by not having the government play organizations against each other
- by being included early enough in the policy process to make a contribution
- by respecting CS right to self-organize and self-select for participation

In return, civil society has to become more transparent to the public and to the Government:

- by providing financial reports to the Government in a timely manner
- by abiding by its commitments to those it represents
- through periodic self-assessment to ensure that we abide by principles of good governance, both in how we operate and in our advocacy
- by committing to self-regulation through a Code of Conduct that is robust and can be used to hold civil society to account

The APRM: A Window of Opportunity

The APRM, scheduled for 2007, provides a good window of opportunity for at least two reasons: it is a locally 'owned' process, and it is an inclusive process. The APRM is structured to minimize influence from external interests. This gives the process internal legitimacy, as does its broad participatory research methodology. It also provides an opportunity for groups to submit their own contributions to the secretariat. Most importantly,

the APRM is meant to generate a set of targets for improvements that the country is meant to work towards subsequently.

If civil society is able to mobilize itself to express its desire for a particular kind of relationship with government, and is able to offer a document for the process it will be then have something with which to lobby for an agreement between the two sectors to become one of the targets for improvement that the Government commits itself to after the APRM. The APRM provides an opportunity for all of civil society to contribute to this process, widespread ownership and consensus being important for the legitimacy of such an agreement. As such, the outcome that we would be aiming for would not be a signed agreement so much as a skeleton agreement to negotiate on and a deadline for its signing and implementation.

Challenges:

While the APRM is a good opportunity to raise the issue of quality engagement between civil society and Government, several challenges may emerge:

- Considering the diversity of civil society, getting wide-spread buy-in on such an agreement may take a long time to negotiate.
- The whole exercise could be viewed with suspicion or resisted by civil society, or by Government, or both parties.
- Considering the scale of the APRM, such an initiative could get 'lost' in all the other pressing agendas that will emerge.
- As with all 'voluntary' undertakings in civil society, unless someone who is not constrained by other obligations can charge of the initiative the project may be not get enough human resources.

Collaboration versus Cooptation:

A question constantly asked within civil society is, how can civil society collaborate with Government and yet retain its identity as a government watchdog. When Policy Forum was first established its entire focus was on

engaging with existing policy processes, which are invariably Government-led, in order to influence them to become more results-focused and people-centred. Over time we have learned that it is risky to focus one's entire strategy around processes over which one has little control. We discovered over time that often, the result was that we would either lose focus and continue a dialogue that has little effect on the status quo (cooptation) or we would lose the 'favoured status' relationship we had with Government (exclusion). When the Government decided to exclude Policy Forum from certain processes, the ability of the network to fulfill its activity obligations became severely hampered. It was therefore agreed that Policy Forum would review its strategy in 2005. The New strategy still has policy engagement as an objective but in a much more focused, strategic and selective way.

So how can the civil society/government relationship move from collaborative cooptation to negotiated partnership? Before negotiating a strategic partnership with government, civil society organizations must take account of the following

- 1. Be clear about the roles of the government and the governed.** A recent flyer produced by the Media Institute for Southern Africa (MISA) put it this way. "You elect the government in power, The government is run by money you pay in taxes. Your money is used to carry out different activities and programs on your behalf. When the government is elected by you, and run by your money, you should be able to question how your money is spent."
- 2. Establish a strategic focus.** Know specifically what you want to achieve and what you are willing to give up in order to get it.
- 3. Be proactive.** The one who sets the agenda begins with the upper hand. When we approach government with a proposal for collaboration the relationship begins from the basis of our proposal rather than from a previously established government agenda.
- 4. Understand how government works.** This will help to identify who to approach, for what and when. It will also help to formulate a

strategy that is win-win and therefore more likely to succeed in the long term.

5. **Be consistent.** Principles should not be sacrificed for a relationship with government. It should be noted that the relationship is never an end in itself but, a means to an end. It is important not to lose focus.