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Sustaining civil society for sustainable development

By Sarah Peck with support from the Commonwealth Foundation

This brief aims to provide a summary of research undertaken from September 2015 to March 2016 on civil society and sustainable development in Barbados and Grenada in the Eastern Caribbean. The research was interested in how civil society as a sector is sustained and the labour practices and experiences of the people that work in the sector.

Research methods

The aim of the research was to get a sense of the civil society sector as a whole in Grenada and Barbados therefore participants were sampled across a range of civil society organisations, varying in the way they described their organisation (NGO, INGO, community-based organization, co-operative), their longevity and the scale at which they work.

Who?

The project was narrowed down to civil society organisations (CSOs) concerned with sustainable development, whether this was in the built environment, climate change or youth work. Participants were 'key members' of their organisation and I have used the term 'civil society actor' in the rest of this leaflet. In-depth interviews incorporating a work-life history approach and a more semi-structured approach were utilised.

Interviews were also conducted with a number of organisations supporting CSOs in their work.

Context

In Grenada and Barbados certain contextual factors influence the way the CSOs and NGOs operate, especially the contemporary economic environment with tourist revenues, financial services and the global recession shaping the civil society sector. The Cotonou Agreement, for example, has structured the opportunities for dialogue with government. The ease of registration for community organizations also facilitates the development of NGOs on the island.

Findings

1. Working in NGOs and CSOs can feel uncertain and insecure at times

Work-life histories show that civil society is being shaped by the people who are part of that sector. They are bringing ideas, knowledge and values to their working environment to shape what they do.



Diversity

Work-life stories of civil society actors point to the diverse nature of civil society work and the multi-purpose and multi-sector nature of many of the organisations.

Often driven by a passion to see a different future and to be involved in moving towards this, participants come into the sector from a variety of backgrounds, including working for the government or from the corporate sector.

People also draw on learning from outside of the country or periods of time away from the Caribbean, articulating the importance of individual mobility for developing civil society in the Caribbean and the mobility of knowledge associated with these individuals.

Flexibility

Throughout the work-life histories the flexibility of work in the civil society sector is exemplified in a number of ways. Examples of this include activists bringing ideas from their educational background to their work, utilising skills from previous (and other current) work experiences, their faith and using their homes and cars as their offices. This flexibility was also emphasised in the number of concerns that civil society is connected to in Grenada and Barbados and the need to respond to pertinent issues in a timely and appropriate manner. This also demonstrates the multiplicity of skills required for work in the civil society sector.

Uncertainty

The work-life stories of the majority of the participants are characterised by uncertainty and insecurity, and associated anxiety, although less so for those working in well-established or international organisations. Working in civil society is often associated with having a number of part-time occupations, and often working at weekends, evenings and unpaid hours. Not knowing where the next project might come from also increases anxiety levels. This insecurity has the potential to reduce human resources and human capital in the sector. However, civil society work is also an opportunity for learning, stimulation and an arena for development.

Findings

2. Mobilising financial resources is important

The research explored the important relationships and networks civil society actors build as part of their everyday work. This section explores flows of money for civil society work.



Multiplicity

Examining the financial flows around civil society organisations demonstrates the diversity and multiple sources of funding that civil society actors utilize in order to sustain their work in the sector.

This includes income-generating schemes within the organisation. This self-sufficiency was conceptualised as a process through which to develop the organisation, independent of any outside agendas. Having a regular source of income was also seen as a way of keeping the organisation 'ticking over'.

New funding actors

Philanthropy and corporate social responsibility processes also increase financial security for civil society. Corporate social responsibility is also part of the civil society sector in the Caribbean, although often accessed in an ad-hoc way, with CSOs often approaching businesses individually rather than as part of a formulated programme.

Diaspora groups also offer a valuable source of revenue, and other social support for CSOs. CSOs are starting to utilise technological advances such as PayPal and crowdfunding to maximise their financial connections to diaspora groups. Users of crowdfunding felt that the system had the potential to create more democratic relations between donors and CSOs.

International donors

CSOs highlighted the changes in the landscape of development financing in the region, often associated with the reduction in availability of money from international donors. Grants from international donor agencies however remain an important aspect of CSO work, and require considerable time and expertise. Participants voiced their own ethical concerns about the relationships they build with donors, the structures that are imposed on them through this system and the challenge of attempting to find a balance between their own visions and desires and the agendas of the donor.

In thinking about the future of donor-grantee relations participants expressed a desire to see closer, more personal relations with a donor organizations, rather than just a distant giver of aid.

FINANCING

Findings

3. Social capital helps sustain CSOs and NGOs

The research shows that civil society actors utilise social flows to sustain their work, incorporating less tangible relations such as friendships, mentoring, reciprocity and the building of trust and respect. This is sometimes referred to as 'social capital'.



Friendship

Civil society actors explained how friendships, both in Caribbean and overseas, can sustain their work through emotional, financial and organisational support.

Friendships in this context also brings up suggestions of the importance of 'who you know' and professional friendships.

Volunteering and reciprocity

Building a network of volunteers can help CSOs sustain their work and bring in new knowledge and skills, from the Caribbean and overseas, but this can also place greater responsibility on the organisation and sometimes challenge the longevity of the certain projects.

This was also exemplified in the nature of the reciprocal relations between organisations, with CSOs often exchanging labour, knowledge, skills and ideas.

Mentoring

Mentoring practices also support civil society organisations in their work, with mentors often coming from more established CSOs and mentees from more nascent organisations. The mentoring relationship does not appear to just be centered on the transfer of knowledge from one individual to another but also on emotional support, with the mentor also gaining from the relationship. Mentoring also has the potential to reproduce forms of labour, for example by encouraging uncontested engagement with certain protocols and apparatus.

Trust and respect

The building of trust and respect enables the formation of new social relations and ways for civil society actors to advance their cause. This was often seen as a process, not as pre-existing, but as features that had to be earned, often through demonstrating the value of the work, by behaving in a 'professional' manner or by associating with people who are held in high esteem.

This was also seen as something that can be threatened by critical voices, potentially impeding the work of civil society.

Although civil society actors emphasise the importance of social flows for their work, it must also be considered that the building of social capital is not universally accessible and may limit the engagement of some civil society organisations, reducing the diversity of ideas and values within the sector.

SOCIAL NETWORKS

Findings

4. Civil Society builds relationships to contribute to knowledge, services and governance processes

Flows of knowledge and services and the importance of them for civil society work cannot be under-estimated.



Knowledge

Civil society actors are creators of knowledge about a particular subject, often focused on a local site or community.

They share this knowledge with other actors to influence their work, for example government ministries. Their knowledge and skills are also utilised by other sectors of society, for example universities and schools where students connect with CSOs to learn from their expertise. This is not a one-way relationship however with academics, for example, also contributing their knowledge and ideas to civil society.

These knowledge flows often seem to be contingent on social flows, with for example the building of trust aiding the sharing of ideas. Knowledge can also be seen as an exclusionary process, where certain information is inaccessible to some CSOs.

Multiplicity of purpose

Civil society organisations exist to address a multitude of concerns and they do this in a wide variety of ways. The services offered by civil society can include, for example project work, such as setting up a farm, or lobbying the state for the protection of public spaces or working with the state to develop new laws. These practices form part of civil society actors' methods for constructing a different future.

Transnational connections

Civil society work appears to be juxtaposed by being on one hand embedded within the local environment and on the other inherently transnational. Transnational connections drive two-way flows of knowledge, money and support between CSOs in the Caribbean and people and organisations overseas. The importance of regional networks for information sharing and solidarity was articulated by a number of participants.

Engaging with governance

Advocacy in particular is carefully thought out and balanced with maintaining a relationship with the state, with some actors expressing a preference for dialogue decision-making. Collaborative ways of working were often emphasised, with services offered by civil society often seen as complimentary or to support state processes, but CSOs often felt these efforts were under-recognised. Civil society actors also contest decisions by the state as the need arose, utilising a variety of channels through which to do this. Some actors articulated the need for a substantial shift in the way civil society is thought about and recognised in governance processes in the Caribbean, and a re-articulation of the role of the citizen in decision-making in the country.

EXCHANGE

Conclusion

Civil Society offers alternative ideas for a different future

Utilise and reflect on diverse funding sources:

As civil society organizations utilize multiple funding sources it will be important for them to reflect on how these different sources of funding shape the work they do. Civil society may benefit from greater support to maximize their use of innovative funding sources, for example through the tourism sector, a social enterprise model of working or more structured CSR, without losing sight of their visions for a different future.

The insecurity associated with civil society work has the potential to limit the human resources and capital of the sector as people become fatigued by the work and others are tempted to leave the sector. For civil society to thrive it needs to interest a variety of people and sustain their engagement.

Building social capital

Opportunities to build social capital seem important for civil society sustainability. It may be particularly important to build bonds between organisations operating at different scales, so that contributions at national and regional level reflect a diversity of voices. Building networks between locally based organizations across the Caribbean region would allow the sharing of experience and resources as well as solidarity and moral support. Civil society in the Caribbean may also benefit from an opportunity for CSOs of all different types to share their experiences and expertise with each other in an informal setting. This may also provide a forum to discuss wider issues that may be relevant for the sector, for example how the sector can best engage the government. Such a forum may also offer moral and emotional support for CSOs during challenging times.

Changing relations with donors

There is a desire to see an altered relationship between donors and CSOs. This could involve closer dialogue to build projects together, mechanisms for greater donor understanding of the sector in the context of the Caribbean, streamlining of accountability processes and longer term funding mechanisms to support prolonged engagement with development concerns.

RECOMMENDATIONS

My thanks go to everyone who took part in and helped with the research. If you have comments or queries related to the research please feel free to get in touch with me at: sarahpeck248@gmail.com