

Summary literature review Civil society advocacy collaborations in India

The research project *Civil society advocacy collaborations and their contributions to CSO capacities and legitimacy to advance inclusive sustainable development and equality in the Indian context* studies advocacy collaborations between civil society organizations (CSOs) working at the grassroots, national and international levels in India. Unlike other studies of transnational advocacy networks, this project focuses on the contributions of collaboration to the agency and work of Indian CSOs at the domestic level. The project examines how the different capacities, viewpoints, and forms of power and legitimacy shape these CSOs' domestic political roles as they interact with each other and navigate the opportunities and constraints connected with collaboration. The study will focus on CSO activity around two themes: disaster risk reduction and women's rights.

Main findings

- Existing research shows that advocacy collaborations between CSOs can constrict CSO activity in the Global South in many ways, with donor dependence playing a key role. At the same time, collaborations can also enable these same CSOs, for example through exchange of information, promotion of credibility and coalitioning. However, there is a lack of research about how organizations navigate the constricting and enabling factors of collaboration.
- Autonomy and ownership are often considered fundamental to the role of civil society. Autonomy is rooted in freedom and choice, while ownership lies in the capacity to take responsibility. In practice, however, autonomy and ownership are not straightforward. The autonomy of CSOs is shaped and challenged by their relationships with the state, the market and other CSOs, while ownership can be interpreted in diverse ways, ranging from control over programmes to psychological senses of ownership. The manner in which issues of autonomy and ownership emerge, relate to each other and are navigated by CSOs need further research to better understand their roles in shaping CSOs' contributions to inclusive development.
- Civil society in India is pluralistic in nature, ranging from caste and professional membership associations to self-help groups and from social action groups seeking to empower marginalized communities to reactionary counter-movements. Therefore, the role of policies like 'Dialogue and Dissent' can only be understood in relation to this complex civil society context.
- The contribution of civil society to inclusive and sustainable development in India is complex. Many movements and formal organizations seek to advance the rights and needs of marginalized groups, however, much of more formally organized civil society is dominated by highly educated, urban sections of society. Recently, some CSOs have acted as instruments of the state to counteract other civil society groupings. This same state also increasingly constricts some forms of civil society action, while being more welcoming to others.

Policy messages

The policy framework 'Dialogue and Dissent' funds programmes that centre on strategic partners and their activities. However, the role of CSOs in advancing inclusive and sustainable development can only be understood with consideration of on-the-ground realities in the country involved. Three key messages emerge:

- The rich and complex terrain of Indian civil society provides many opportunities for collaboration to advance inclusive and sustainable development. However, the case of India shows that the added value of collaboration needs to be assessed considering the state and wider civil society contexts. Some key questions that require further examination are:
 - What is the composition of civil society in a country, working on a certain issue?

- What agendas and actors advancing or countering inclusive and sustainable development are present and active?
- What voices are weak or silenced?
- How can different forms of collaboration contribute, relating to these realities?
- Future policy should pay close attention to Southern CSOs' perspectives on the ways that collaboration can enable them. This insight might enhance future partnerships by championing shared goals, values and activities.
- Autonomy and ownership are complex, interrelated notions. They are not absolute and are navigated by CSOs that are embedded in multiple relationships. How ownership and autonomy can be protected and advanced in collaborations depends on a CSO's perspective on how questions of autonomy and ownership emerge for them, and the possibilities and constraints of their contexts.

Relevant literature

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