

High Level Forum in Accra

**NGO Platform of Swiss Development Organisations:
Position on the Paris Declaration and Accra Agenda for Action**

1. Introduction and recommendations

With the Paris Declaration (2005), donors and recipient countries hope to deepen the effectiveness of development cooperation. This core objective is beyond dispute. However, both the focus and the implementation of the Declaration's five principles have spawned doubts and criticisms all around the world. In the run-up to the High Level Forum (HLF) set for 2-4 September 2008 in Accra, civil society organisations have discussed and systematised these criticisms in an international debate and formulated recommendations intended for the HLF.

In this position paper the NGO Platform of Swiss Development Organisations focuses mainly on the roles of civil society organisations in partner countries and links them to the Paris Declaration. On that basis it has formulated the following five recommendations with respect to Switzerland's positions at the negotiations on the final Declaration of the HLF (Accra Agenda for Action) and at the HLF Ministerial Meeting as well as the further implementation of the Paris Declaration by the SDC and Seco:

- 1) recognizing the roles and autonomy of civil society organisations
- 2) strengthening local and democratic ownership
- 3) recognition of civil society organisations as discussion partners
- 4) predictable and independent financing of civil society organisations
- 5) comprehensive and accessible information

2. Starting point

1. Development is a political and social process. One of the main lessons from past development cooperation is that aid will remain ineffective unless development is carried out by those most directly concerned. Civil society organisations play a crucial role by supporting and encouraging the active involvement of disadvantaged and marginalized population groups in development processes. Their solidarity with these groups and their anchorage at grassroots level gives them the legitimacy to play a variety of roles at different levels.

- They mobilize and empower poor and disadvantaged people to claim their rights and express their needs. They advocate their interests in the wider society in the South and North, thereby increasing support for these groups.
- They contribute significantly to ensuring that development cooperation addresses the needs of disadvantaged people and that it reaches them. To that end they implement their own programmes and projects, take action with partner governments and donor agencies, do advocacy work and militate against the instrumentalisation of aid for foreign policy and economic purposes.
- They contribute to the effectiveness of development cooperation by evaluating and sharing experiences with other actors, drawing lessons and pursuing innovative approaches.
- They contribute to monitoring the effectiveness of development cooperation by holding their governments and donor agencies accountable, by urging citizens, local authorities and parliaments to do likewise, and by drawing attention to shortcomings and failures.

To fulfil these functions civil society organisations need (1) the space, in which to organize themselves, (2) the right to have a say, and (3) the necessary information, capacities and resources.

2. Public and private donors can only assist, not replace development processes. Their overarching purpose is to help

- reduce poverty and social injustice
- further human rights, gender equality, democracy and environmental sustainability.

These goals are achievable only in conjunction with civil society organisations. Their legitimacy and diverse roles make them central actors in development and hence vital partners in development cooperation.

3. The Paris Declaration completely overlooks the roles of civil society. Donors and partner governments hardly take them into account in implementing the Declaration. They obviously regard development cooperation as a matter between governments:

- The Declaration implicitly defines ownership as ownership by the partner-country government, not by the society as a whole. In so doing it misses one of the essential tasks of development cooperation, that of furthering democracy and participation. Besides, this jeopardises the sustainability, quality and effectiveness of development cooperation, as these are dependent on broad-based popular support. Only in the fewest of instances do partner governments allow civil society organisations to participate "at eye level" in the formulation of poverty reduction and national development strategies. One consequence if this is that many strategies neglect the needs of large sections of the population, especially women and minorities - and hence the purpose of development cooperation.
- When it comes to implementing the Declaration, civil society organisations are welcome to act as executing entities for individual parts of programmes at best. There is no denying that they can fulfil a significant role in this regard, thanks to their knowledge and close connection to the beneficiaries of the aid. By the same token, their participation in the monitoring and evaluation of both national strategies and international aid programmes would lead to much more effective development. If their involvement is restricted to executing aid programmes and projects prescribed by the government, this

is tantamount to instrumentalising civil society organisations for the implementation of the Declaration.

- Governmental and multinational donor agencies and partner governments also circumvent civil society organisations with respect to a second central principle of the Paris Declaration, that of accountability. It occurs mostly between partner governments and donor entities. Civil society organisations often have highly restricted or no access at all to necessary information; moreover they often lack capacities and resources for carrying out their watchdog function. The same goes for monitoring and evaluation.
- Civil society organisations are sidelined in two ways when it comes to implementing the Declaration. First, they are not included as discussion partners in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of national strategies and donor programmes. Amongst other things this means a loss of knowledge that is invaluable to the effectiveness of development cooperation. Second, they are also marginalized as development actors in their own right. Donor agencies are increasingly channelling resources directly to partner governments whilst cutting back their contributions to civil society organisations. In so doing they are buttressing the power of central government whilst weakening local and decentralised actors and hence preventing any balance of forces.

In short, three major gaps can be detected in the Paris Declaration and its implementation with respect to civil society:

- Lack of recognition
- Lack of participation
- Lack of transparency

To a great extent, the above-described shortcomings also affect other essential actors of development and development cooperation in partner countries such as parliaments, local authorities or the private sector. This paper limits its focus to civil society organisations. The NGO Platform nevertheless points out that the recommendations are valid for the other actors as well.

3. Different actors – different roles

To remedy the shortcomings mentioned above, a clear distribution of roles is needed between governmental and multilateral donor agencies, partner country governments, the civil society organisations from donor countries and those in partner countries.

(a) Civil society organisations in partner countries

- They ensure that aid reaches the disadvantaged and marginalized population groups by (1) helping these groups express their needs and claim their rights, (2) bringing their concerns to the wider society, and (3) implementing their own development projects, at times independently of national strategies.
- They encourage the participation of their constituencies, the population as a whole, local authorities and parliaments in formulating, implementing, monitoring and evaluating national strategies and international aid programmes; they also support them in holding their governments and donor agencies accountable.
- They follow development activities at all levels of government (national, regional, municipal), document bad practices, corruption, abuses of power, etc., and take action

with the competent authorities and donor agencies. They monitor the transfer of resources from the central to the local government level and support it with appropriate projects.

(b) Civil society organisations in donor countries

- They support civil society organisations in partner countries in fulfilling their roles, promote capacity building amongst them, whilst gearing themselves toward their needs.
- Provided that there are no local capabilities for implementation, they can undertake to coordinate and implement development programmes.
- They form the link between their civil society partners and donor agencies. They endeavour to persuade donor agencies to include the various actors as partners in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of international aid programmes, and to hold the partner government to a similar approach for national strategies.
- They network themselves internationally so as to support their civil society partners more effectively.

(c) Partner country governments

- They assume democratically legitimate leadership in the development process, organize the policy dialogue with all stakeholders and recognize their country's civil society organisations as vital partners in their own right.
- They secure the legal space that civil society organisations need to fulfil their roles, and provide them with platforms from which to participate in formulating, monitoring and evaluating national strategies.
- They publish in an active, transparent, understandable and accessible manner all important information regarding the orientation, goals and outcomes of national strategies and international aid programmes, negotiations with donor agencies, the disbursement, distribution and use of funds as well as regarding the national budget.

(d) Governmental and multilateral donor agencies

- They recognize civil society organisations in the partner country and in their own country as both vital actors in their own right and dialogue partners in development and development cooperation.
- They avoid any actions that could compromise the room for manoeuvre, or the needs and interests of civil society organisations.
- They encourage the participation of civil society organisations in the national strategies and international aid programmes by urging partner governments to pursue the multi-stakeholder approach in policy dialogues.
- They support partner governments in actively providing the public with transparent and understandable information, and in turn inform the public in the same manner regarding their own strategies, programmes and aid flows.
- They provide predictable funding for civil society organisations in the partner country independently of the partner country's state channels. In so doing, their preference is for indirect funding through civil society organisations in the donor country, as a way to safeguard the independence of civil society organisations in the partner country. Direct

funding limits the independence of civil society organisations. They must also be in a position to take critical stances vis-à-vis donors if, for example, the latter should infringe the rights and interests of their grassroots base, hamper their participation, allow bad practices and abuses, or attempt to influence or exploit the organisations.

4. Recommendations

Civil society organisations are central actors in development and hence vital partners in development cooperation. The NGO Platform of Swiss Development Organisations has formulated five recommendations with a view to eliminating the three main shortcomings of the Paris Declaration mentioned above relating to civil society – recognition, participation and transparency. It then references several SDC and Seco policies, strategies, principles and guidelines.

Recommendation 1: Recognition of roles and autonomy

SDC and Seco recognise civil society organisations in partner countries and in Switzerland as central and autonomous actors and partners in both development and development cooperation. They therefore also recognise the autonomy of these organisations in formulating their programmes, they refrain from exerting any influence whatsoever that might undermine that autonomy, as well as from instrumentalising those organisations for implementing the Paris Declaration.

Recommendation 2: Strengthening local and democratic ownership

SDC and Seco advocate the principle of local and democratic ownership in partner countries. They demand and promote the multi-stakeholder approach to policy dialogue (governments, parliament, local authorities, civil society organisations, private sector, etc.) so as to ensure participation in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of national strategies and international aid programmes. They prevent the exclusion of legitimate interest groups and do their utmost to secure for civil society organisations the space they need to fulfil their roles.

Recommendation 3: Recognition as discussion partners in the debate on aid effectiveness

SDC and Seco recognise civil society organisations in partner countries and in Switzerland as vital dialogue partners in the shaping of national strategies and in Swiss development cooperation work. They therefore encourage civil society participation in the process of reflection on the effectiveness of aid.

Recommendation 4: Predictable and independent financing

SDC and Seco guarantee predictable and independent financing for civil society organisations in partner countries. To preserve the independence of these organisations, financing is done independently of government channels in the partner country and preferably through Swiss development organisations. Where SDC and Seco provide general budget support, they make an equal amount available to civil society as a way of counterbalancing the strengthening of the central government through the general budget support.

Recommendation 5: Comprehensive and accessible information

SDC and Seco publish comprehensive, transparent, understandable and accessible information in partner countries and in Switzerland concerning aid negotiations as well as the disbursement, distribution and use of funds. They also hold the other donor entities and partner governments to publishing this information in the same way in their countries.

SDC recognises civil society as a partner and key actor both in its Strategy 2010¹ as well as its NGO Policy.² It defines civil society (and private sector) participation as a principle of governance³ and as the basis for successful development.⁴ Furthermore, it describes access to information as the basis of any democracy.⁵

SDC and Seco state in their joint paper on the Paris Declaration that country ownership – not government ownership – is the most important condition for successful development, and that a multi-stakeholder approach is therefore important. With their specific know-how, the parliament, private sector and especially civil society take crucial functions in the country's social and economic development. Harmonisation and alignment are most effective if led by the government in dialogue with its different national stakeholders.⁶

In the view of SDC and Seco, the inclusion of information on aid flows in the budget makes the government more accountable to the parliament and to civil society. They see greater transparency and accountability as essential both to leadership by partner countries and to aid effectiveness.⁷

Seco's Strategy 2006 too holds that participatory approaches help ensure enhanced aid quality and effectiveness. It is important for poverty reduction strategies to enjoy broad popular support.⁸ Seco mentions broad-based democratic support amongst citizens as well as improved political participation as a condition for budget support.⁹

¹ SDC (2000). Strategie der DEZA 2010. pp. 12 and 17.

² SDC (2007). NGO-Politik.

³ SDC (2004). Information and governance. p. 4ff.

⁴ SDC (1999). SDC Guiding Principles. p. 11.

⁵ SDC (2004). Information and governance. p. 8.

⁶ SDC-Seco (2007). Stocktaking Paper. Two years after the Paris Declaration: Where does Switzerland stand? pp. 2 and 4.

⁷ SDC-Seco (2007). Stocktaking Paper. Two years after the Paris Declaration: Where does Switzerland stand? p. 3.

⁸ Seco (2002). Leistungsbereich Entwicklung und Transition. Strategie 2006. p. 6ff.

⁹ Seco (2005). Seco-Strategie für generelle Budgethilfe. p. 8

In its human rights policy SDC expressly calls for poor and marginalized groups to have access to political decision-making processes. It strives to buttress civil society organisations in Switzerland and partner countries in order to help individuals and groups realise their rights.¹⁰ In its anti-corruption strategy it calls, *inter alia*, for participatory budget processes, performance monitoring and a decentralized approach, and assigns civil society the role of "whistle-blower".¹¹ In its regional policies it underscores the importance of cooperating with local organisations for greater leverage and hence greater effectiveness.¹²

At the World Bank, SDC and Seco jointly advocate greater commitment to the long-term strengthening of local institutions and the participation of the various population groups.¹³ The African Development Bank should do more for the closer involvement of civil society and the private sector.¹⁴

Not least of all, in their joint strategy for assistance to Eastern Europe, SDC and Seco ascribe special importance to the involvement of citizens in decision-making processes. They underline that development projects achieve lasting success only when they are attuned to local needs and carried forward by local forces.¹⁵

5. Concluding remarks

The abovementioned passages show that the recommendations are in line with the principles of SDC and Seco. There are two reasons why the NGO Platform nevertheless sets them out:

1. In the light of their principles, SDC and Seco can credibly represent these recommendations at the HLF in Accra. They already partly introduced these principles at the consultations on the first draft of the Accra Agenda for Action. The NGO Platform wishes to encourage them in upcoming negotiations on the Accra Agenda for Action not to go back on their initial suggestions for improvement and to represent the recommendations both in these negotiations and at the HLF Ministerial meeting.
2. SDC and Seco practice does not always match their principles. In several of both agencies' priority countries there are complaints from civil society (and other actors in the country) about lacking participation at all levels and stages of national strategy processes (formulation, implementation, monitoring, evaluation). Members of the NGO Platform confirm this. The reasons for this lie partly in the fact that the two agencies are not always able to push through their principles while acting in concert with other donor entities. They are also partly down to the fact that the two agencies are not always meticulous about their principles, especially as regards civil society involvement. In answer to the question as to the role of civil society in direct budget support, agency representatives say that in matters of budget support they work only with democratically elected governments.¹⁶ Yet democratically elected governments alone are no guarantee

¹⁰ SDC (2005). DEZA-Menschenrechtspolitik: Für ein Leben in Würde. pp. 13 and 15.

¹¹ Korruption bekämpfen. Deza-Strategie 2006. p. 12

¹² See for example DEZA (2006). SDC's Medium Term Strategy 2006-2010 for Development Cooperation in South Asia (MTSSA). p. 16.

¹³ DEZA-Seco (2004). Die Schweiz und die Weltbank – Leitlinie. p. 15.

¹⁴ DEZA-Seco (2005). Die Schweiz und die Afrikanische Entwicklungsbank – Leitlinie. p. 5.

¹⁵ DEZA-Seco (2004). Der Schweizer Beitrag zur osteuropäischen Transition. Die technische und finanzielle Zusammenarbeit mit den Staaten Osteuropas und der GUS. p. 12.

¹⁶ The most recent example was Seco Director Jean-Daniel Gerber at the conference held on 16 May in Bern under the theme "Der Streit um die Entwicklungshilfe".

of participation. With its recommendations, the NGO Platform wishes to encourage SDC and Seco to be more mindful of their principles in the further implementation of the Paris Declaration, and to pursue the common dialogue on implementation with civil society organisations in Switzerland and in partner countries beyond Accra.

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