Promoting Civil Society Organisations

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have emerged as influential actors in both national and international development scenarios. Despite the many differences in defining what CSOs are, there seems to be unanimity in assessing them as necessary agents especially in a democratic context.

Civil society is the totality of voluntary, civic and social organisations and institutions that form the basis of a functioning society, in opposition to the force-backed structures of the state (whatever the political system) and the market with its related commercial institutions. The working definition offered by the London School of Economics is useful in assessing the role of CSOs. According to this definition, civil society is the 'arena of uncoerced collective action around shared purposes and values.' In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, although in practice the boundaries between the state, civil society and the family are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degrees of formality, autonomy and power. Civil society is often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.

CSOs become very significant in the context of the widening gap between rich and poor, the pauperisation of larger numbers, growing corruption and the perverse misuse of power all over the world, but particularly in the developing nations. It has been argued that the political element of many CSOs facilitates better awareness and creates a more informed citizenry who will make better voting choices, participate more responsibly in politics, and hold the government more accountable as a result. Thus CSOs are claimed to be vital to the effective functioning of a democratic society. The non-political organisation in civil society builds social capital, trust and shared values which get transferred to the political sphere, thus holding the society together, facilitating an understanding of the interconnectedness of society and interests within it.

A strong civil society will serve as a 'watchdog' holding authorities accountable for their actions, acting as a corrective by campaigning against abuses of power and both protecting and promoting human rights. CSOs frequently act as sources of policy advice and as facilitators of dialogue and negotiation. They also provide a channel for service delivery where governments are unable or unwilling to provide basic social services.

Thus, a major role that CSOs can and do play involves the monitoring of abuses of power and human rights violations, together with the generation of public awareness through advocacy, the promotion of responsive and accountable governance and respect for human rights. Past experiences show that CSOs can perform effectively in conflict-affected situations. They can play a crucial role in building and sustaining peace. Their understanding of, and links to communities provide them with vital knowledge of local contexts and sensitivity to the needs of local populations and cultural norms which are essential for any developmental effort. CSOs act as mediators because of their access to, or influence over important actors and groups which external organisations do not and cannot have.

CSOs are generally autonomous from government interests and thus they serve as a locus for promoting growth. They can perform vital roles in helping promote and develop pro-poor policies. Vulnerable and marginalised groups like women, youth and indigenous groups are helped to enter into dialogues, peaceful negotiations and even dispute resolution. Some recent examples in the state of Kerala, where communal harmony was restored through the efforts of non-governmental organisations, are a clear example of this.

From an Indian perspective, the attempt to establish a civil society is relatively recent, beginning with the colonial period. Thus the conflict between traditional values and attitudes arising from the segmental and hierarchical nature of Indian society, and modern values based on equality, rights and justice enshrined in the Constitution, is marked. The powerful caste groups come into conflict with each other, and even with the state, making civil society an arena of intense contestation. In the Indian context, CSOs therefore have the challenge of reconciling various identities and their interests as well as pursuing the common good. The influence of caste on the state and powerful elitist groups within civil society make the task of strengthening the CSOs a difficult one.

The simple argument so far has been that, in spite of the many ambiguities and complexities and the pull from the state and the market, civil society and CSOs play a crucial role in a democratic form of life by acknowledging the dignity and right of every human person and thus promote the values of justice and peace.

However, there have been manifestations of either a sheer absence of CSOs or the impotence of civil society in times of major crises. Two examples are the Gujarat carnage and the invasion of Iraq. During and after the Gujarat carnage, there was an absence of any effective civil society intervention in the state except for a few groups and individuals. In the Iraq invasion, the CSOs have failed to bring about any substantial change in the situation in spite of intense activity.

It is against this background that we should seriously look at the status of CSOs with a view to strengthening them. Despite the ambiguities and complexities, every concerned citizen should become involved in promoting a vibrant civil society.

Chief Editor