

Civil society's contribution to the Millennium Development Goals

National strategies to achieve the Millennium Development Goals require the support and involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs), who play a role quite different from the other stakeholders in development. They represent important segments of the population in a manner distinct from government as they directly reflect—and respond to—the needs of a broad range of communities.¹

Within countries, CSOs can contribute to MDG-based poverty reduction strategies in at least four ways: publicly advocating for pressing development concerns, helping design strategies to meet each target, working with governments to implement scaled-up investment programs, and monitoring and evaluating efforts to achieve the Goals. Internationally, CSOs can also mobilize and build public awareness around the Goals, share best practices and technical expertise with governments, and deliver services directly.

CSOs have been engaged in some or all of these activities for many years. Here we highlight how their activities can be channeled to help reach the Goals. But to do so, they need political freedom, clear institutional roles, ways of partnering to implement programs, and in some cases, training and financial resources (chapter 7).

Some civil society organizations have expressed reservations about the Goals (box 8.1). Yet, most of them have spent years dedicated to the objectives that the Goals represent: promoting gender equality and fighting poverty, hunger, illiteracy, disease, and environmental degradation. Indeed, the international consensus for poverty reduction targets has come about in significant part thanks to civil society action in recent decades.

CSOs thus play a crucial role in scaling up the delivery of services to meet the Goals. In addition to their important role in representing the needs of poor people, the UN Millennium Project strongly recommends that CSOs participate in the design, implementation, and review of MDG-based poverty

Box 8.1
CSOs and the
Goals: critiques
and opportunities

Many civil society organizations broadly support the global partnership that the Goals encapsulate, as laid out in the UN Millennium Declaration, but remain skeptical about the Goals themselves, for several reasons. They question whether the Goals are different from previous UN goals that were not met. They have not been systematically involved in the Goal-setting process and so feel no ownership. They argue that the Goals are “top down,” imposed by the international community, rather than locally developed, and that there is uncertainty about their role in achieving the Goals. They see the Goals as too narrow and unambitious, especially in comparison to the UN Millennium Declaration, leaving out critical issues of importance. For example, the Goal for gender equality falls short of the aims set in the Platform of Action at the UN Conference on Women in 1995, which governments around the world committed to. They are critical of the fact that only Goal 8, which spells out the responsibility of developed countries, lacks time-bound targets.

These are all legitimate concerns that policymakers need to address. The concerns come from a history of broken promises and systematic exclusion of CSOs from decision-making. But the criticisms focus more on the process of designing and implementing the Goals than the concept and substance of the Goals themselves. The Goals represent, at a minimum, the very objectives that CSOs have been trying to achieve for decades.

The Millennium Development Goals differ from other UN goals because, for the first time, they have been endorsed not only by the UN system and all its member states but also by other major stakeholders. They thus represent a real opportunity for global and national cooperation. They have a political momentum because of their unique link with the hopes of the new millennium. And they have already demonstrated staying power, and the ability to move major governments to recommit to goals such as 0.7 percent of GNP in official development assistance. As we argue throughout this report, achieving the Goals will require a dramatically different level of national and international effort.

Achieving the Goals will require strategies that are locally owned and developed, with full participation from all relevant constituents, including CSOs, the private sector, and other key stakeholders. Without their full involvement, the Goals cannot be implemented at the national level.

The Goals constitute a minimum set of objectives that the global community has agreed to. In several country contexts, they can provide the basis for more ambitious national objectives. Strategies to achieve them may also require a broader set of inputs than specified by the MDG targets and indicators—these could include, for example, sexual and reproductive health or energy and transport services. Achieving the Goals will require national stakeholders to agree that the Goals constitute a minimum set of objectives that can be more ambitious in different contexts. And it will require implementing the Goals in a way that focuses on reaching marginalized and underprivileged groups and regions.

If implemented in the spirit of the UN Millennium Declaration, the Goals can be a powerful framework for realizing key development outcomes. Fear of failure could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. We all have to believe in success—and to mobilize our energies and those of others to follow through.

reduction strategies in all developing countries. Given the important diversity of CSOs, one should of course not expect all CSOs to be involved in all areas. But we do recommend that, wherever possible, CSOs partner among themselves and with governments to pursue MDG-focused activities in advocacy, design, implementation, and monitoring.

Providing public advocacy for the Goals

In every country CSOs can focus public attention on the Goals and the actions under way—or not under way—to achieve them. CSOs drive broad-based mobilization and create grassroots demand that can hold leaders accountable and can help place the Goals at the heart of national debates. Strategic alliances of CSOs—with local authorities, national governments, and the international community—can raise public awareness of their government's commitments to the Goals, highlight urgent development priorities for the government's immediate action, and ensure that the needs of different groups are taken into account.

For example, the Africa Network Campaign for Education for All, a regional network of 23 national coalitions, has mobilized public opinion around the need for free, quality education for all. Its national coalition in Malawi, the Civil Society Coalition for Quality Basic Education, has advocated for including important education-related expenditures, such as teacher training and welfare expenditures, in the national PRSP.

National advocacy is also crucial in developed countries. For example, Bread for the World, a nationwide grassroots movement in the United States, has increased awareness and support for policies that reduce hunger domestically and internationally. Each year, it mobilizes about 250,000 letters to the U.S. Congress on issues of hunger and lobbies for more development assistance to poor countries. In the United Kingdom, the Make Poverty History Campaign has already galvanized remarkable support to urge the government to lead developed countries in making a major breakthrough in support for development in general and the Goals in particular.

Contributing to policy design

While many CSOs focus on advocacy, others have a key role in policy design. We endorse a formal role for CSOs in the creation of national MDG-based poverty reduction strategies (chapters 4, 6, and 7). Experience from many countries shows that the extent of openness in policy formulation can directly affect the quality of policies adopted—and the effectiveness of implementing them. CSOs can contribute to identifying priority investments, targeting priority areas and communities, helping design effective implementation strategies, setting national and local budget priorities, involving women in the design and implementation of these strategies, and ensuring that the poor and marginalized groups are central beneficiaries.

This is the approach espoused by the Country Coordinating Mechanism of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, which calls for country-level partnerships, including CSOs and private sector representatives, to submit grant proposals based on priority needs. Once grants are approved, these partnerships oversee program implementation. Although not perfectly executed in all countries, the approach offers a model for how civil society

can be formally included in policy design and formulation. Another important example of a CSO contribution to policy design is the work of Law and Advocacy for Women in Uganda, which is advancing policies to address female genital mutilation, women's land rights, and reproductive rights.

CSOs can also provide first-hand information about constraints "on the ground" and the full range of resources needed to implement interventions. For instance, the Tanzania Gender Network Program has been at the forefront of participatory budget analysis, bringing together officials from the Ministry of Finance to collaborate with gender experts and examine how women's needs are addressed.

If the concerns of excluded or marginalized groups are not articulated during policy debate, national MDG-based poverty reduction strategies will likely miss the very people whose needs they are designed to address. For example, indigenous groups are rarely included in planning and processes (UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues 2004). Yet policies for health, education, environmental management, and infrastructure development affect them directly, so their representatives need to be part of the policy design process. Such participation need not be limited to public policy design. It can also influence private sector activity. The indigenous Secoya community in Ecuador negotiated a code of conduct with Occidental Petroleum's Exploration and Production Company in 1999 to regulate its oil exploration activities in Secoya, setting out principles of engagement based on dialogue and transparency and operational mechanisms for ensuring good environment practice.

Scaling up service delivery

The challenges in scaling up MDG-based strategies are significant (chapter 6). We recommend that civil society partner with governments to help scale up investment through four main channels: engaging local communities, building human capacity, strengthening local governance, and leading implementation and service delivery.

Local community mobilization involves immediate beneficiaries and underrepresented groups (especially women) in decisions of service delivery. Several examples of successful community engagement offer lessons for program design and implementation. The Orangi Pilot Project in Karachi, Pakistan, offers a model for a tripartite arrangement among the local community, the government, and a local CSO to provide improved sanitation services and has been replicated in settlements across Pakistan. The Hunger Project, an international NGO, has implemented a low-cost, people-centered strategy for grassroots mobilization to address hunger in rural African communities. Its "epicenter" strategy is anchored in community leadership and empowerment at the grassroots level, catalyzed by international staff and implemented by national staff working with local governments and national political leaders. Villages build a community center to house a school, a health center, a rural

bank, food processing and storage, and a meeting room for adult classes in literacy, agricultural techniques, health, and nutrition. The project offers lessons for mobilization of local resources, community leadership, and income-generating activities to build self-reliance from the start.

CSOs can train teachers, community workers, and health workers. BRAC, for example, has been training female community health workers in Bangladesh since the 1970s. By 2003 it had trained more than 30,000 health workers in almost as many villages. It provides foundation training and regular refresher training in dealing with common illnesses, such as diarrhea and dysentery, and with improving maternal health. The health workers also provide higher skilled services, such as administering DOTS to combat TB. In another example, the Association of Senegalese Women Lawyers has been training paralegal workers for 30 years to address violence against women through legal channels, winning a tremendous number of cases, including those for land claims.

Making government institutions accountable and participatory requires close collaboration between the local population and the government to set up mechanisms that enable the local community to use existing institutions more effectively. For example, the Movement for Alternatives and Youth Awareness in Karnataka, India, has strengthened institutions of local self-governance to improve school effectiveness. It has facilitated a citizens' effort to evaluate and improve school performance through existing local government structures. More than 1,000 councils have been formed in the past five years, with increased community participation and improved infrastructure for schools. Similarly, the Pamoja Trust, a Kenyan NGO, and the urban poor federation in Kenya (Muungano wa Wanvijiji) have built the capacity of local communities to self-organize, reach consensus on tenure and infrastructure upgrading decisions, and then engage with local authorities and municipalities for land and infrastructure to improve the lives of slum dwellers.

In many parts of the world, CSOs innovate to establish successful delivery models that governments can replicate on larger scale, often offering lessons for hard-to-reach areas and conflict regions. The Grameen Bank, for instance, has famously helped to provide microcredit loans for millions of Bangladeshis, most of them women, contributing to gender equality and small enterprise development at the community level (box 8.2). Other CSOs have often been pioneers in addressing issues that governments deem too sensitive to address publicly or directly, and in many countries they have emerged as a first line of defense in addressing HIV/AIDS. In Thailand, CSOs have led in providing treatment and care to marginalized populations and groups often deemed criminal, such as drug users, sex workers, and migrants who are, in turn, reluctant to deal with government officials (box 8.3). And in the central plateau of Haiti, Partners in Health has helped shatter the conventional wisdom that poor people with AIDS cannot adhere to antiretroviral treatment protocols.

Box 8.2
How CSOs
help Thailand
battle AIDS

Source: UNDP 2004d.

Thailand is one of the few developing countries in the world to contain the spread of HIV. Between 1992 and 2002 the HIV prevalence rate among entering army conscripts plunged from 7 percent of the population to less than 1.5 percent. Research revealed significant populationwide behavior changes, including fewer visits to commercial sex workers and more condom use during sexual intercourse. Civil society organizations played a decisive role.

A broad range of policies and actions contributed to the assault on AIDS, but civil society influenced behavior change through education and outreach. As many as 50 NGOs were working on AIDS as early as 1984, and in 1989 a national NGO Coalition on AIDS was formed to coordinate their work. And as early as 1992, the Thai government began financing their activities.

These organizations delivered participatory AIDS education, created counseling and support services, and pioneered outreach to intravenous drug users, men who have sex with men, and commercial sex workers—at-risk populations that public agencies could not reach.

Many actors deserve credit, but the coordinated efforts of civil society groups helped stem the AIDS crisis in Thailand.

Box 8.3
SPARC—
partnering with
local government

Source: UN Millennium
Project 2005f.

In India the National Slum Dwellers Federation works with the Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centers (SPARC) and the cooperatives of women slum and pavement dwellers (Mahila Milan) to show what citizens and CSOs can do, and what governments can achieve in partnership with them. The biggest success has been to design, build, and manage community-toilet blocks where there is not enough room or funding for household provision. The program took off when local government staff saw how much better they were than contractor-built public toilets.

Working in 50 cities and with 750,000 members, the three CSOs have since been asked to work with local and national governments in redeveloping government-built tenements. They are changing policies and practices by having governments interact with communities in the provision of public services. And they have strengthened the relationship between communities and municipal authorities, setting the basis for partnership on more contentious issues of land tenure.

The Kenya Urban Poor Foundation, the Namibia Housing Action Group, and SPARC in India help build housing projects, undertake community-managed resettlements and provide and manage urban infrastructure and services at scale, showing what it takes to scale up such programs. The Rehabilitation of Arid Environments Charitable Trust (RAE) in Kenya has worked for more than 20 years on the rehabilitation of grasslands in the watershed of Lake Baringo by setting up private and communal fields protected from grazing animals by electric or live fences. The community management of land transformed severely degraded terrain into productive land within three years. PROFAMILIA, a Colombian CSO, has been promoting reproductive health services for many decades. It now provides nearly 40 percent of all family planning products in Colombia.

These diverse examples show just a few ways that civil society initiatives can complement government, ensuring that government efforts respond to the needs of local communities and implemented appropriately.

Monitoring for accountability

Civil society organizations can also monitor and benchmark progress, critical for building accountability (chapter 7). They can highlight regions where progress is slow and further efforts are required. They can engage in broad-based and transparent mapping of government spending. And they can provide real-time feedback to the general public on progress. For example, women's groups in Chile, Ecuador, and Paraguay are constructing quantitative indicators to assess how their governments are fulfilling commitments to women. With support from the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, the groups take indicators of citizen participation, economic autonomy, and women's health and reproductive rights and create a composite index that permits comparison over time, helping women hold governments accountable for progress (UNIFEM 2002).

To help monitor progress, CSOs should be given access to budget records and encouraged to disseminate them publicly. We endorse formal CSO participation in reviews of MDG-based poverty reduction strategies, and budgetary tracking and auditing exercises (see also chapter 6).

In sum, achieving the Goals within countries will require active national civil society involvement through:

- Raising awareness about the Goals, by highlighting development priorities through public dialogue and consultation.
- Designing sector strategies, by identifying priority investments and regions, effective implementation plans, and national and local budget priorities.
- Contributing to the scaling up of investments, using skills in community involvement, capacity building, strengthening governance processes, and service provision.
- Evaluating performance by participating in national MDG reviews, budget tracking, and auditing.

What international CSOs can do

Many civil society organizations extend well beyond the borders of any single country. International CSOs have a crucial role in achieving the Goals, as they mobilize cross-border support, share best practices, and contribute to direct service delivery.

Mobilizing around the Goals

CSOs across the world are creating and mobilizing global partnerships in several ways, with support from international initiatives such as the UN Millennium Campaign, which has helped facilitate civil society campaigns in

more than 35 countries. Social Watch, an international network of citizens groups operating in around 60 countries, reports annually on the fulfillment of the internationally agreed commitments on poverty eradication and equality, documenting country progress toward the commitments and goals. The Latin American and Caribbean Women's Health Network has been monitoring country progress in implementing the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (1994). Such initiatives can help hold national governments accountable for commitments to the Goals by tracking progress and highlighting relevant policy decisions in rich and poor countries alike.

Networks of international CSOs can also mobilize support across borders and build links between communities in different parts of the world. On such issues as women's rights, women's health, debt cancellation, fair trade, and the environment, such networks have shown ways of building support within and across countries (box 8.4). In 2002 Girls' Power Initiative brought young adults from all over the world to the United Nations to get policymakers to listen to their concerns and desires for greater access to reproductive and sexual health services. The World Social Forum, held each year to coincide with the World Economic Forum in Davos, brings together groups from civil society to formulate policy proposals, share experiences, and build networks for effective action. Meetings of this kind have contributed immensely to building bridges between civil society groups in different countries.

International civil society advocacy can also highlight development challenges facing poor countries—and put pressure on governments and the international community. Such advocacy is critical for all the Goals, and many successes show how it can be done. The Jubilee 2000 Campaign, and its successor, the Jubilee Debt Campaign, organized by a wide network of CSOs, put debt forgiveness for poor countries firmly in the center of international development policy discourse. It is now focusing on the eighth Millennium Development Goal on global partnerships for development. The International Gender and Trade Network has meanwhile highlighted the importance of gender issues in international trade. Oxfam International is bringing the negative effects of U.S. cotton subsidies on African farmers to the forefront of WTO negotiations. The Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, through its "W.A.S.H." initiative, is leading an international call to action for sanitation.

Sharing best practices and technical knowledge

International civil society groups can provide technical and policy assistance to developing countries and in many cases, form global repositories of technical knowledge that can help a range of countries (box 8.5). With their rich experience, they can often play a catalytic role in helping countries achieve the Goals.

Box 8.4
The women's movement and UN Conferences in the 1990s

Source: Correa 1999; UNIFEM 2000; UNFPA 2004, IWHC 2004.

Local, regional, and global women's movements actively mobilized throughout the 1990s to put gender equality and women's empowerment on the agendas of major UN conferences. Through women's advocacy efforts, the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development included a chapter on women's role in the environment; the 1993 UN Second World Conference on Human Rights recognized for the first time women's rights as human rights; and the 1995 World Summit on Social Development recognized the gendered implications of macroeconomic policies, especially the crippling effects of debt.

The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing represent important landmarks for the global movements for women's rights and development. National, regional, and global women's organizations played important roles leading up to Cairo and Beijing, within the intergovernmental meetings and in the parallel nongovernmental forums.

At the Cairo conference, women's advocates from developed and developing countries collaborated to successfully move the overall objective of population policy away from reducing population growth to achieving women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. The Programme of Action, adopted by 179 governments, marked a new understanding among world bodies—that population and development are inextricably linked and that women's empowerment is the key to both. And, for the first time, the reproductive rights and sexual and reproductive health of women became central elements in an international agreement on population and development (IWHC 2004).

Three thousand NGOs were accredited to the UN conference at Beijing, and 30,000 people from all over the world attended the parallel NGO forum. The women's movement promoted a broad multifaceted development agenda with women's human rights at its core. Governments agreed to a Platform for Action that outlined goals and recommendations for 12 critical areas of concern (UNIFEM 2000) which further concretized sexual and reproductive rights, recognized the negative development consequences of violence against women, and renewed attention to women's economic rights.

U.S. private foundations and European governments and intergovernmental organizations enabled civil society, particularly the women's movement, to organize, network, define advocacy agendas, and participate in both the Cairo and Beijing conferences and their preparatory meetings. At each conference, there was also a Women's NGO Caucus, a democratic vehicle for consensus building that enabled women's NGOs from around the world to infuse a gender perspective into the process and outcomes of conferences. For instance, much of the language in the Cairo Programme of Action was either initiated or strongly supported by the women's organizations that participated in the preparatory process and the conference itself (Correa 1999). Similar to Cairo, the Beijing Platform for Action incorporated almost 90 percent of the NGO caucus recommendations (UNIFEM 2000).

In the years since these conferences, gender equality initiatives have proliferated. The ICPD has had effective impact at the national level across developing countries. In many countries, policy transformation has occurred, altering public actions and discussions in governments and societies (UNFPA 2004). In many countries, family planning programs have been reoriented to include a wider array of reproductive health issues (Correa 1999). Many post-Cairo and Beijing initiatives are cross-sectorial and often combine policy planning, legal reforms and community-level projects. Violence against women has gained increased visibility, and laws and national policies have been developed or improved to

Box 8.4**The women's movement and UN Conferences in the 1990s**
(continued)

address violence in Latin America and elsewhere. Gender planning saw a breakthrough in countries in the Caribbean and East Asia. In West Africa, emphasis has been given to legal reform and gender and poverty programs; and in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is cited by the women's movement as a major step forward.

Box 8.5**Grameen Trust—spreading knowledge and self-reliance**

Source: Grameen Trust 2004.

From humble beginnings as a research project involving poor women artisans in rural Bangladesh, the Grameen Bank has grown into a massive success in poverty reduction. The Bank has loaned more than \$4.3 billion to nearly 3.4 million borrowers in Bangladesh, with half of them crossing the poverty line. Since 1995 it has been independent of donor funding, showing that microfinance is not only socially rewarding but also financially sustainable.

Grameen has also served as a model for other organizations in Bangladesh, where microcredit programs have been scaled up to reach more than 10 million families. One of the most exciting dimensions of Grameen's experience, however, is the replicability in other contexts. Grameen Trust has mobilized knowledge from experiences in Bangladesh and other countries to support over 127 organizations in 35 countries with funds, training, and technical assistance.

Grameen Trust has provided \$20 million to local partners that have reached 1.6 million families around the world with financial services. Like Grameen Bank, these local CSOs typically have a strong grassroots presence that enables a more effective outreach to poor people. The Trust's cross-country experience enables it to advocate for supportive regulatory frameworks.

Grameen experience demonstrates that community-led innovations, when scaled up effectively, can reduce poverty in many contexts.

An example is WaterAid, an international NGO dedicated to the provision of safe domestic water, sanitation, and hygiene education to the world's poorest people, which uses its research and its documented good practices to influence development policies all over the world. It works with local organizations to help some of world's poorest communities set up, operate, and maintain their own water, sanitation, and hygiene projects.

Shack Dwellers International, set up in 1996 by urban federations to expand contacts with the international community, is another NGO that supports international community-exchanges, linking organizations of the urban poor in different countries. It also visits nations where federations have not yet developed or are only in early stages of development to help countries improve the lives of slum dwellers.

Leading direct service delivery

International CSOs lead service delivery in some of the most challenging places in the world, often in close collaboration with multilateral relief efforts.

Médecins Sans Frontières, for example, works in 80 countries to provide not just emergency health aid, but primary healthcare as well. It works with local teams to rehabilitate hospitals and clinics, run nutrition and sanitation programs, train local medical personnel, and treat chronic diseases. Action Aid International works with 2,000 local partners to reach almost 9 million of the poorest and most vulnerable people, helping them fight for their rights to food, shelter, gender equality, education, and healthcare and a voice in the decisions that affect their lives. CARE International, working in more than 70 countries, reaches 45 million people with emergency and humanitarian relief efforts in addition to longer term primary healthcare, education, savings and loan schemes, and agriculture programs. Such efforts can be hugely important for achieving the broad range of health MDGs.

These large international CSOs, working closely with local organizations to provide much-needed services, are often the first to reach regions hit by conflict or natural disasters, even before governments can (chapters 11 and 12). These services are especially invaluable where the government is either unable or unwilling to invest.

To recap, international civil society has an important international role for the Goals in:

- Mobilizing public opinion around the Goals and around the developed countries' commitment to Goal 8.
- Sharing best practices and technical expertise through intercountry community exchanges, direct technical support, and advice on scaling up to governments.
- Providing health, education, infrastructure services that contribute to achieving the Goals.

All told, both domestic and global civil society organizations have a crucial role to play in ensuring the Millennium Development Goals are achieved. The UN Millennium Project strongly supports the role of CSOs in achieving the MDGs, and recommends that they be supported and empowered to play central roles in each country's adoption of an MDG-based poverty reduction strategy.