

10 July 2011 - Civil society groups say they want to have a stronger voice in setting the development agenda ahead of a key global summit on aid effectiveness later this year.

Civil society organisations, or CSOs, gathered in Siem Reap, Cambodia in late June in what was the conclusion of a two-year consultation process to develop principles on how such groups can take a larger role in making development meaningful. The Global Assembly of the Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness aimed to consolidate the position of civil society groups ahead of high-level international aid meetings in Busan, South Korea, later this year.

"There is an increasing recognition of civil society as an essential actor in healthy and vibrant development agendas," said Lun Borithy, executive director of the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia, which co-hosted June's CSO meeting. "There is an increasing self-realisation that we as civil society must also hold ourselves to be ever more responsive, effective and accountable if we are to help bring positive and lasting change to our world."

Borithy said civil society groups have an essential role to play in their countries' development. "CSOs are indeed concerned about assuring development that achieves positive and sustainable changes for the poor and vulnerable people," Borithy explained. "And this concern requires CSOs as well as donors, government and aid recipients to work efficiently and collaboratively."

Until recently, major donors and governments in developing countries have largely dominated high-level consultations on aid effectiveness. CSOs say they want to play a more robust role. The upcoming summit, dubbed the Fourth High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, marks the first time CSOs will come to the table as equal partners with government ministers, donors and other players, advocates say.

During the June consultations in Cambodia, CSOs finalised a key document that will be used to guide civil society groups working in development. The 'International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness' sets out a human rights approach aimed at defining guidelines for what it means for civil society groups to be effective development actors. The framework also embodies principles of gender equality, environmental sustainability, and organisational transparency. CSOs plan to use the finalised framework as the basis of a "collective voice" for engaging with donors and governments in Busan.

Caroline McCausland, country director for the group ActionAid in Cambodia, attended the June meetings. She said the final framework document represents a definitive statement for CSOs - one that takes a more principled approach to development effectiveness than what donors themselves have committed to.

"It is the first time that CSOs have come together and developed a global framework with principles that will hold them accountable," McCausland said.

The framework for CSO development effectiveness represents an attempt to move development away from a welfare or charity approach, to something that more closely aligns with a human rights-based perspective.

In the past, McCausland said, a group like ActionAid may have jumped into income generation projects that were effective initially, but were ultimately unsustainable over the long term. Such strategies carry the danger of fostering an over-dependency on NGOs. That perspective has changed to one where the emphasis is placed on organising aid recipients to demand - for themselves - that authorities fulfil their responsibilities in financing services.

"For example, we have helped to build and support campaigns to increase the education budget, remove school fees and train more teachers so that all poor children - not just ones who are lucky enough to live in an area supported by an international NGO - can get a decent quality basic education," McCausland said. "This approach is not a quick fix, but in the long run it has a far bigger and deeper impact."

But preparations for Busan may be leaning heavily on donors' needs and giving short shrift to CSOs. Early drafts of outcome documents for Busan, McCausland said, "lend an ear only to donors' needs."

Such attitudes are arguably reflected on the ground in countries like Cambodia, where some CSOs say they must have a stronger voice. In Cambodia, where donor money makes up roughly half the government's national budget, ensuring that civil society is included in development policy is still a challenge.

"There is a need for CSOs to continue to call for space for meaningful dialogue in the design, implementation and monitoring of national strategic development strategies and plans, and to be fully recognised as development actors in our own rights," McCausland said.

Yet Cambodia's widely criticised plans for a broad law governing non-governmental organisations - which critics claim will tighten control over civil society - are still underway.

Empowering civil society groups rather than restricting them will be key to the long-term sustainability of development efforts in countries like Cambodia, McCausland explained.

"Cambodia continues to be dependent on aid and it is likely that the Royal Government will also continue to be more accountable to donors rather than citizens," she said. "There is a need to reverse this trend through development of exit strategies which put increased emphasis on domestic solutions such as taxation and promote domestic businesses and enterprises, rather than on foreign aid and tax holidays to attract foreign investment."

However, advocates have also praised Cambodia for endorsing the Istanbul CSO Development Effectiveness Principles, guidelines that formed the basis of the framework that emerged from June's meetings in Siem Reap.

The Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness is scheduled to take place from Nov. 29 to

Dec. 1 in Busan.

Source: [IPS](#)