

Bhutan, Civil Society, and the EU

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Why Does the EU Want to Support Civil Society?

During the visit to Bhutan of the European Parliament's delegation for relations with countries of South Asia (DSAS) in May this year, we were delighted to help launch the EU's Programme in support of civil society in Bhutan. This initiative was negotiated by the EU'S Ambassador to Bhutan and the Royal Government of Bhutan, following discussions with civil society and engaging Helvetas in its delivery.

The programme budget is 2.5 million Euro and, while this may be small compared with the EU's overall funding programmes with Bhutan of some 42 million Euro between 2014-2020, it is expected to bring about significant developments in civil society.

The Programme has three main objectives designed to address certain challenges linked to both policy and capacity to engage civil society organisations (CSOs) in sustainable development, including community-based organisations as well strengthen operation and capacity - training, networking, dialogue to improve the overall environment for civil society

As the Ambassador of the European Union to Bhutan, Tomasz Kozlowski said at the launch of the Programme: In a consolidating democracy a strong civil society is important to contribute to the social and economic development of Bhutan.

Whenever an official delegation from the European Parliament travels to meet with parliamentarians in another country, we always aim to meet with civil society organisations.

These may be local grassroots organisations offering practical measures to protect the local environment, support people with disabilities, or help people with drug problems. They may be organisations that want to change policy to promote the representation of women, change the circumstances of disadvantaged groups, or protect animal welfare. Others may be the national branches of more global bodies such as Transparency International, Human Rights Watch or Greenpeace. Some may be charitable organisations, others more engaged in campaigning. They can represent local businesses, trade unions, farmers - a whole range of interest groups. Generally, they are viewed as not-for-profit, non-state actors

operating on an independent and accountable basis, linked by shared concerns and collective activity to promote citizens' interests and concerns.

In developing countries, civil society can be a powerful agent for change. Alongside government and private sectors, it can contribute to improved services, enhancement of social inclusion, and government accountability.

So why do we want to meet CSOs? Why does the EU wish to support their development?

Civil society organisations give us a perspective on how a government is functioning and how open, or closed, a government or society is to new or critical ideas. It can help us understand the daily lives of people - can they play a part in their own development or does government not allow them to be active and engaged? The EU considers that a society is more democratic if people are able to participate in ways that they feel make a contribution and a positive difference to society. They are thus able to exercise rights such as the freedom of assembly and association set out in the UN Convention on Human Rights and other international Treaties. Our goal is to move to the implementation of these standards throughout the world although we ourselves sometimes fall short.

For politicians, civil society can be both an inspiration and an irritant. In their engagement with government, civil society can bring people's experiences to propose changes to legislation that can better meet the needs of the people themselves and thus improve the quality and effectiveness of legislation. The very fact that politicians are willing to listen and engage, helps to increase people's trust in the institutions. However, politicians cannot always respond to the demands of civil society organisations for a variety of reasons, such as insufficient budget, the competing demands of different groups, the need for a wider societal benefit to sometimes override a local concern. Bhutan's experience with the Gross National Happiness Index can illustrate these challenges. It can be an irritant when politicians feel that demands are unreasonable or they feel they are being criticised for not supporting particular causes or policies. However, most politicians also recognise that this is part of a democratic process, not a threat to it.

We note the interest from Bhutan's Parliament in developing their own capacities in terms of policy research and outreach to the public, and hope, as the European Parliament, to be able to assist in that.

For governments with a repressive view of human rights, civil society can be a particular challenge. In fact, in the worst regimes, civil society is either almost non-existent as it is persecuted by national government or it is the puppet of government. The EU has a policy and programme dedicated to the defence of human rights defenders. We see some governments put ever-more testing

administrative barriers in the way of civil society, which results in CSOs being unable to function. It is absolutely right that organisations which wish to lobby government or receive public funding should be transparent about their management and funding but a balance has to be found which does not automatically view foreign-funding as a threat or criticism of the government as treason.

For Bhutan, we are seeing a gradual development in CSOs, with 53 registered at the time of writing. Many groups may never register as they may exist informally at local levels as happens in so many small communities where helping one's neighbours is seen as simply part of the local culture. There is also a transition in the country from bodies which have been initiated by the Royal Family to those emerging in other ways. In the UK, some of our oldest organisations stem from the 1800s and have enjoyed royal patronage, such as the RSPCA (the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) founded in 1824 and given Royal status in the 1840s, and is still a strong and active body today.

CSOs usually come into being when people feel there is a task to be done, a change to be made. Being part of a civil society group can be demanding when resources (including people) are few, communication and travel cumbersome, and funding difficult to come by. The EU's programme is, in part, designed to help CSOs understand how to maximise those resources they have and develop new ones. This can be even more difficult for countries with a small population, so any comparison should be made with care.

However, the EU has seen the difference that such funding has made in many parts of the world. Some examples can be found in a recent study for our Budget Control Committee¹ which includes some case studies in countries as varied as Myanmar, Kyrgystan, and Nicaragua where we have worked with civil society to help them improve their national governance - albeit in very different circumstances to those of Bhutan.

The EU recognises that different countries have different needs and ambitions but we believe that a civil society that is free to organise adds immeasurably to the overall well-being and democratic progress of a society. We wish to support Bhutan in its journey.

1 Value for money: EU programme funding in the field of democracy and the rule of law, which can be found at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/studies>