

NORWEGIAN PEOPLE'S AID
“Partnership Cooperation in Civil Society”

Introduction

This policy document is intended as a tool in devising, designing and assessing Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) international cooperation programs.

NPA has a longstanding tradition of closely linking the aims and focus of our international solidarity work and cooperation with people's own initiatives and agendas. This implies the strengthening of their organisations as a strategy aiming at the empowerment of people and communities, as well as their ability to influence the conditions under which they live. Such focus and purpose are reflected in NPA's support of liberation movements and people's organisations in communities where open conflict exists as well as in societies that have been in process of democratisation over the past three decades. These intentions are also reflected in NPA's statements regarding its governing principles as well as in policy documents.¹

NPA's implementation of these principles relates to the purposes underlying cooperation with our partners. NPA has a great deal of experience, on the one hand, with the importance of a strong link between our own purposes in supporting people's organisations and initiatives, and on the other hand, the manner in which we relate to, and cooperate with, locally based partner organisations.

The present document in part represents a follow-up and updating of NPA's existing policy on partnership with local organisations.² However, the document is also intended to express our policies and principles in the new setting within which the concepts of *Civil Society* and *Civil Society Organisations* are central to international cooperation and democratisation.

The document results from a seminar as well as meetings and e-correspondence between NPA-employees at Head Office and offices abroad, and its adoption *in principle* at the NPA board meeting held on December 13th 2004. We hope that the document will be discussed so that contributions from our partner organisations abroad can provide us with a deeper understanding of the issues involved, thus increasing the appropriateness of our efforts and their ability to meet the needs of the various communities.

Not all of the topics related to partnership and civil society are addressed in this document. We consider “advocacy” and “lobbying” to be important functions, which should be addressed separately. The issue of phasing out of a cooperative relationship is only briefly touched upon in this document. NPA's policies on partnership cooperation call for the competence of, and attitudes toward, NPA personnel. Hence many elements reflected in the present document are relevant to the development of personnel recruitment and training.

The focus of this document is partnership with civil society organisations, civil society being the main scope of our cooperation. NPA also cooperates with government institutions. However, such cooperation is based on specific decisions taken at HO and is not discussed in the present document. The document commences with a brief presentation of what NPA understands by civil society and civil society organisations. This represents the natural context and approach when defining NPA's policy on partnership cooperation.

¹ “Principles and value basis for Norwegian People's Aid”, adopted by NPA's General Assembly 22.06.03, and “Policy and Strategy for NPA's International Humanitarian and Development Work 2004-2007”. Oslo, Dec.03

² “Norwegian People's Aid – Policy for cooperating with local partners” – Oslo, June 1998

1. CIVIL SOCIETY – NPA’S PRINCIPAL ARENA

Concepts

The concepts of civil society and civil society organisations have lately become relevant and important to international cooperation as well as to development policies. NPA’s principle arena for its endeavours is civil society, and our organisation is a civil society organisation, our cooperation being with civil society organisations. Hence we find it necessary to define and discuss the use of the term “civil society” in the light of our policies and relevant experience.

For NPA, the term *civil society*³ is value-neutral; it is neither “good” nor “bad”. However, when identifying partners with which to cooperate, the criteria will be whether they are “positive/negative” and “relevant/irrelevant” as civil society organisations. NPA will identify as partner organisations popular organisations promoting citizen participation. Civil society is often defined as “non-statal” and “non-profit making”, or as a third sector intermediate between the state and the market. However, it has proved difficult to identify and categorise some organisations as strictly profit-making or non-profit-making, state-dependent or state-independent.

The social sectors of civil society often distinguish between “oppressed”, “poor”, “marginalised”, “popular”, with “the people”, “workers”, “peasants”, “women” on the one side, and “wealthy”, “dominant” sectors, the “elite” on the other. However, within these two main sectors are to be found both active and passive public spheres. Popular organisations and the active participation of popular sectors exist, as do oppressed peoples who are not organised or publicly active. Similar divisions may be found within the dominant sectors.

NPA’s overall definitions of civil society and civil society organisations are the following:⁴

- *“Civil Society” is the public "sphere" in which ideological and political debate, influence and power, take place*
- *“Civil Society Organisations” are formal or informal non-governmental groups, organisations and institutions with a wider objective than profit-generation.*

Although “*civil society*” in itself is value-neutral, every “*civil society organisation*” represents values and policies. The character and role of each will differ according to the traditions and situations pertaining to each society. However, experience gained in several countries during recent decades provides the background to the following summary of positive – from NPA’s point of view – roles and impacts of civil society:

- In many instances, the concepts of “*civil society*” and “*civil society organisations*” have been used to describe forces and spaces for countervailing the concentration of power and resources, from being an alternative space to counteracting dictatorship, to being a space for political, ideological, cultural and social struggle between opposing forces disputing hegemony within the society.

³ In NPA’s Development Dictionary on Civil Society: “The term CS is value-neutral - CS in itself is neither “good” nor “bad”. However, a development- oriented intervention will seek to identify what is perceived as positive/negative actors or forces within CS; the extent to which actors and forces are perceived as “positive” or “negative” relates to the nature, aims and objectives of the particular intervention itself. It is sometimes also argued that the characteristics of CS are non-statal and non-profit (finance/business/ commerce). It has, however, proved difficult to determine certain phenomena as of a strictly “profit” or “non-profit” character. A more “flexible” approach refers to CS as the social/public sector or “sphere” of society wherein ideological and political debate, influence and power are exercised.

⁴ In NPA’s International Strategy (op.cit), civil society is “understood as groups, organisations and institutions lying “between” the state and the citizens, and with a wider purpose than making profit”

- Civil society normally contributes to processes relating to people's participation and democratisation. Many transitional processes towards elected governments have not proven effective in ensuring political participation and democracy. However, a strong civil society may contribute to positive democratic development. Hence, in relation to international cooperation, civil society is often seen as a precondition and a contribution to democracy and development. Peoples' participation is often reflected by the connection and link provided by civil society between citizens and the state, and lends collective force to the interests of citizens by enhancing public policies and changes in society that reflect popular opinions and visions. Hence, it can lend voice to people who are otherwise deprived of access to decision-making fora; people-based organisations can expand the outreach of democratic reforms. Civil society can also add diversity to what otherwise risks turning into one-sided decision-making processes. In itself, civil society can also be a medium of political socialisation – i.e. serve as “a school of democracy”.
- Democratisation at local and national levels is not distinct from the global level. Globalisation implies increased concentration of power in fewer hands through dominance and the absence of regulations. However, globalisation also implies that individuals and organisations are given fresh opportunities for establishing contacts and alliances. Hence, globalisation implies a challenge through the shaping of rules and the formation of democratic institutions at local, national, regional and global levels. There are examples of the manner in which civil society organisations pursue a “cooperative” globalisation by contributing to the dissemination of information to citizens, acting as “watch-dogs” in respect of national and international authorities and corporations, as well as promoting people's participation in, and insight into, international negotiations.

NPA shall cooperate with civil society organisations that promote democracy, and;

- represent the interests of particular segments of society (ideological actors),
- contribute towards shaping public and corporate policies (exercise influence),
- raise public awareness, i.e. provide information concerning problems and their causes; promote public support for issues (sometimes in cooperation with state and/or market actors); and sensitise those involved by functioning as “a school for democracy”.
- mediate between those actively involved (conflict-resolution)
- hold public authorities and corporations accountable (“watch-dogs”)
- provide social networks for members, promote skills and knowledge concerning cooperation, and promote norms and values, such as trust and reciprocity.

A variety of settings

The nature and function of civil society varies depending on traditions, structures and situations. Spending time and resources in analysing civil society environments is probably one of the keys to improving our cooperation skills. Hence NPA must dovetail its basic principles with analyses of the context when assessing opportunities and challenges.

In many cases *conflicts imply oppression* of the traditional civil society that goes underground, assumes a low profile, or finds other forms of organising and voicing people's interests.

The legitimacy of the state as possessors of authority and power to regulate, judge and represent the will of society, is challenged where rights are violated. Hence, in *serious conflict-situations*, civil society organisations are often perceived as alternatives to an oppressive state. This applies to occupied territories or in countries where there is no sovereign state. However, it also applies to dictatorships and other authoritarian regimes that do not acknowledge their obligations towards individual citizens or all sectors of the

community. Civil society organisations may also be recognised as alternatives to the state when the latter fails to recognise its obligations and embarks on privatisation.

Societies in *transition to democracy* may pose fresh challenges to civil society. In some cases central civil society organisations assume the responsibilities of government. Relations and roles affecting the state and its citizens may undergo change.

A *post-conflict situation* may vary in accordance with traditional social structures existing prior to and post-conflict, the country's political and cultural context, and the intensity of the conflict. Social and political arenas are often transformed post-conflict, and the character and objectives of Civil Society may consequently undergo change.

Civil society organisations may also contribute towards state-building processes, as in post conflict situations where national reconstruction and development processes may require transformation of a weak or authoritarian state. Civil society organisations may promote transparency, improved accountability, democracy, and pluralism.

NPA's approach to the concept of Civil Society

People's rights and people's own initiatives and participation for development are foundational to NPA's work. Liberation movements and people's organisations promoting equal rights and opportunities for all are important objectives for NPA.⁵ These movements and organisations normally attempt to bring about changes in state structures and policies.

NPA shares the vision of civil society organisations assuming roles contributing to a society that endeavours to secure peoples' rights. The state should provide opportunities and ensure conditions for people's participation, and in a democracy civil society organisations should not be regarded as a substitute for the state. Civil society organisations alone cannot institute or ensure people's rights. Hence in a democracy, civil society organisations should recognise the role of the state and interact with it. Ensuring people's rights calls for interaction and in some instances implies cooperation, while in others it calls for confrontation by demanding accountability and transparency, and challenging aspects of state legitimacy. Therefore, a strategic focus for NPA is the achievement of a dynamic alliance for democratisation and development between the state and civil society organisations. However, in many societies such alliances hardly exist, and in most are to be found ongoing conflicts of interest between the state and sectors of civil society.

In terms of our strategy for international cooperation, NPA's interests and focus are to serve as people-orientated democratic actors within civil society. A central issue for NPA in assessing the possibility of becoming engaged in new projects is the following: *Does the programme/project, or the work we are to support, represent initiatives taken by organised oppressed people?* The answer to this question will enable NPA to assess the policies, plans, and performance of both government and civil society organisations. This calls for a situational analysis for each case/country in order to identify the "sphere" within which

⁵ NPA's strategy for international involvement includes the following:

Long Term Objective (LTO): Oppressed groups have increased their prospects and opportunities for controlling their own lives, and of together developing a society that secures political, civil, cultural, economic and social rights for all.

Immediate Development Objective (IDO): Rights-based organisations, working in areas of conflict and oppression, have strengthened their ability and capacity to mobilise for democratisation and social and economic change.

ideological and political debate, influence, and authority are involved. On the basis of such an analysis, a case/country-specific strategy may be developed.

The state and civil society organisations are inter-dependent in any attempt at developing democracy. Although our focus of support and partnership is on civil society organisations, NPA will not pursue a state-minimalist approach that promotes the free-market and privatisation. On the contrary, we would rather explore ways of enhancing the competence and capacity of the state to respond to the needs of the population.

Based on NPA's objectives, the organisation's international cooperation should encompass the following two principal working areas:

- a) *Influencing Norwegian authorities, the public and international organisations* in order to bring about change (see above-mentioned objectives) through advocacy, i.e. lobbying, networking, public awareness work, and
- b) *International cooperation*: Supporting partner-organisations in their struggle for change (cf. above-mentioned objectives).

2. PARTNERSHIP

2.1. WHAT DOES NPA MEAN BY PARTNERSHIP?

NPA sees partnership as a two-way cooperative relationship, sharing the complementary resources of various partners in terms of finance, skills, technology, information, knowledge of particular realities, and thus power – in order to fulfil their objectives related to oppressed social groups. Working with popular organisations as partners is to establish partnership with civil society.

Partnership as a relationship

1. Partnership is practised through cooperating with partners who have a vision and values compatible with those of NPA.
2. Partnership is based on an active dialogue, mutual trust, openness, commitment, and respect for each other's autonomy, integrity and identity.
3. Partnership is context-specific, depending on local conditions with respect to economic and social development, culture, values, and the development of civil society.
4. Partnership is a process in which NPA's focus on roles and types of partner organisations and projects constitutes an integral aspect of social processes.
5. The relationship is subject to dynamic interactions, changes, and external factors, calling for continuous situational analysis.
6. NPA aspires to having a supportive attitude and approach towards its partners, and aims at strengthening their protagonist role.
7. With respect to thematic components and crosscutting issues forming integral aspects of program and partnership cooperation, NPA will respect the particularities characterising partner organisations and their varying contexts, avoiding standardised approaches.
8. It should be acknowledged that varying access to resources and authority may create relationships of inequality between parties, and thereby a traditional donor-recipient relationship. NPA's cooperation with partners aims at reducing such imbalances.

Types of partners

NPA identifies its partners among rights-based civil society organisations regarded as democratic actors in their local societies or communities. NPA's strategy for international humanitarian and development work emphasises that NPA's partners are organisations that mobilise for democratisation and social and economic change favouring oppressed groups.

Historically, NPA prefers in principle to cooperate with grass roots organisations representing oppressed social groups such as liberation movements, community based organisations, and social organisations, both formal or informal in nature. However, since selection of partners depends mainly on the local/national context, other types of rights-based organisations may be selected or preferred as partners in some cases (e.g.: intermediary NGOs, research institutions, media). It has become increasingly relevant for NPA to distinguish between *project partners* and *strategic partners*. While relationships with the first group are limited to practical cooperation on projects, those related to strategic partners also include a close affinity that goes beyond project cooperation. Relationships with strategic partners include ongoing consultations and dialogue on policies and strategies.

Partnership phases

NPA's partnerships may encompass a variety of phases: with or without funding, prior to, during, and following funding. Although financial support for partner organisations forms part of such cooperation, NPA intends to avoid focusing exclusively on a financial approach, which characterises traditional donor-recipient relationships. Accompanying partner organisations goes beyond providing financial support.

When initiating a partnership, a relationship without direct funding or limited support to small-scale initiatives can facilitate the building of mutual trust. Limited support at the outset may also help to find ways of making partners less dependent on NPA and to favour the establishment of partnerships, which are not founded on financial considerations reflecting a traditional donor-recipient relationship.

After direct financial cooperation with a local partner has been terminated, the relationship may continue through networking and advocacy as well as through the sharing of experience and skills between this partner and other partners in the region.

Defining and continuously reassessing the time frame for project cooperation between NPA and the partner organisation may help to maintain focus on sustainability aspects. Lengthy periods of financial cooperation may create dependency; on the other hand, necessary long-term financial cooperation should be seen in relation to the aims and objectives of the cooperation. It may in some cases be useful to suspend financial support in order to test a partner's ability to continue functioning without NPA-funding, followed by a review of continued financial support.

Assessment of sustainability should be carried out in terms of the results seen in relation to project objectives, the processes of which the project is/was a part, and/or the partner-organisation itself. The assessment should have an approach in which financial, social, political, and organisational aspects are addressed in an integrated manner. The achievement of sustainability should be measured in relation to the stated objectives of the project. A project aiming at strengthening an organisation may achieve sustainability in the sense that the objective - a strengthened organisation - is attained without the activities themselves necessarily continuing to exist.

NPA considers it important that these challenges be discussed with partner organisations from the outset. Circumstances and conditions may undergo change during the defined timeframe. The concept of sustainability should therefore be discussed with partner organisations at the beginning, during and at the end of the project cooperation.

NPA's non-funding contribution to a partnership

NPA's contribution to a partnership normally has wider objectives than mere funding, and involvement in a project/program should be constantly reviewed and subjected to evaluation. Expected inputs may include:

1. Political commitment, not neutrality, when supporting social processes and actors.
2. Awareness of the need for cultural and historical knowledge of relevant countries and regions
3. Clearly stated policies and priorities in order to ensure an understanding of NPA as a partner-organisation.
4. Possession of capacity (i.e. "volume") and competence (i.e. "content") of partner organisations in accord with self-defined needs
5. Development of systems and working methods of special significance to NPA's cooperation concerning:
 - o Support for the organizational development of partners
 - o Support for awareness-raising and mobilization among oppressed groups
 - o Networking developed by both partners and NPA, and information sharing.

When cooperating with partner organisations, the role of NPA is to accompany the partners in their development efforts, and to carry out regular evaluation of the organisation with respect to the achievement of stated objectives. Accompaniment includes the locally defined and prioritised facilitation of financial and human resources.

In Norway as well as internationally, NPA will give priority to advocacy as part of its partnership-based cooperation. Advocacy includes lobbying activities aimed at voicing NPA's policies and facilitating the objectives of partners in Norway as well as internationally. The parties should agree on roles and strategies related to each advocacy issue. Networking contributes to both advocacy and competence building through the establishment of contacts and the exchange of information, as well as toward providing opportunities for building and strengthening alliances.

2.2. INITIATING AND DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS

The identification of whom we cooperate with as well as what kind of activities we support is important to NPA. Hence, when assessing fresh opportunities as well as ongoing cooperation, NPA focuses on the nature of the partner organisation, its roles, capacities and potentials.

Selection and assessment of partner organisations

Organisational assessment is central to NPA's work. This is basically carried out in two situations:

- a) when selecting a partner organisation or a partnership relation is established, and
- b) during an on-going partner relationship.

In both situations, the following organisational aspects shall be assessed:

- 1 The policy of the organisation:
 - its values
 - its capacity for analysing its context
 - degree of participatory devising of its own agenda
 - training of leaders and members
 - promotion of equal opportunities for men and women
 - its approach to cultural conflicts

- policy on sustainability (including the approach to its social, political, and financial aspects)
- 2 The unity of the organisation:
 - levels of commitment and shared interests at various levels
 - real representation (of members or of external actors)
 - capacity to mobilise
 - level of internal communication/accountability towards members
 - transfer of knowledge between all levels.
 - 3 The technical and administrative competence of the organisation:
 - transparency
 - capacity to manage financial resources, elaborate proposals, and to manage activities and personnel
 - capacity to balance the management of service delivery and political agendas.
 - 4 Capacity to relate to, and make alliances with, other actors:
 - capacity to identify relevant actors at various levels (local, sectoral, national, international)
 - capacity to make alliances based on political agenda/interest in sharing experiences with others.
 - 5 Capacity to influence, have impact, and make changes:
 - capacity to assess strengths and weaknesses, and to combine a variety of approaches
 - capacity to communicate the organisation's message to the media, mobilisation skills, negotiation skills, and the ability to wield influence
 - degree of consistence between the vision of the affiliates on the one hand and influence of the organisation on political agendas on the other.

Besides the above organisational aspects, cooperation between one or more of NPA's thematic areas⁶ and the partner organisation's areas of active involvement is a condition for partnership cooperation.

Selected partners are normally those that demonstrate coherence of policies and unity at the outset of a partnership with NPA, though there may exist shortcomings with respect to technical/ administrative capacities, relations with other actors, and influence/impact. These areas are often focused upon as areas to be developed within the partnership.

Scope of partnership

a. Partnership within various geographical contexts:

Relationships with partners may be developed at different levels: local (community, municipality), provincial, national, regional, or global.

When determining the geographical level of the partnership, two opposing criteria regarding which processes to support must be considered: on the one hand, the social anchorage and the degree of participation at grass roots level; on the other, the potential for multiplication/proliferation of results and political influence. The former leads to involvement at local levels, the latter at national, regional or global levels.

b. Short-term and long-term partnerships

NPA should give priority to long-term partnerships involving social organizations and other partners; in such cases, organisational development usually constitutes a central component of

⁶ "Policy and Strategy for NPA's International Humanitarian and Development Work 2004-2007". Op.cit

the partnership. However, NPA should also support short-term campaigns with the aim of producing or communicating information, to engage in lobbying (e.g. for ratifying or amending a law) or to bring about short-term changes. In such cases, the focus is not organizational development but rather public awareness and the bringing about of specific changes.

Indicators of partnership progress

When defining strategies at country/regional levels, NPA must include clear indicators for monitoring related to:

- Changes in the country/regional programs towards partnership-oriented cooperation
- Changes in the priorities of each partnership-cooperation related to project components and working methods (organizational development, awareness raising, mobilization, and networking).