

INSIGHT

Engaging Civil Society in Eliminating Poverty in Nepal



CSOs can assist in bringing citizens' voices and evidence from the ground to national and international attention to trigger the development of appropriate strategies. Photo credit: ADB.

CSOs can play an array of roles in implementing the SDGs, but they need capacity support and a conducive legal and political environment to do so.

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Introduction

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have a vital role to play in supporting governments in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including end poverty (SDG 1).

CSOs can pilot innovative approaches, be watchdogs, generate evidence, monitor the SDGs implementation, hold government accountable, and promote public awareness of the SDGs.

CSOs need to build their capacity to reach this potential while governments should provide a conducive political and legal environment for them to thrive.

In Nepal, the federal system of governance provides an opportunity for local CSOs to engage with government in designing, implementing, and monitoring poverty reduction programs.

Analysis

Development is the right of people and government is accountable for it. However, governments often cannot achieve ambitious development goals on their own. Collective and coordinated efforts at local, national, regional, and international levels are required. Governments should include and facilitate engagement with other actors, such as CSOs, the private sector, universities, think tanks, and the public. This broad engagement is crucial for countries like Nepal, with its diverse castes, ethnic and indigenous groups, and 123 language groups.

In recent years, Nepal's economic and social progress has included reducing poverty rates, increasing literacy rates, and narrowing gender disparities. The country aims to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. However, poverty is still high in rural areas and among socially disadvantaged groups.

In the context of SDG 1, CSOs may play the following roles:

Development partners

CSOs can work with government as development partners in implementing the SDGs. A Save the Children study found that CSOs can play a key role particularly in situations where governments lack capacity, capability, or the will to provide essential services to their citizens. This is particularly relevant in areas affected by conflicts and characterized by high levels of poverty and a lack of access to basic services.

During the Maoist insurgency (1995–2006) in Nepal, CSOs provided food, medicine, and other services to people in remote areas. This was possible by ensuring that CSOs are independent, not aligned to any political parties and not biased in delivering services.

CSOs are often well-suited to meeting the needs of the poor, as they can be more flexible than the government and can identify creative and innovative alternatives to development. CSOs can pilot innovative and inclusive poverty reduction approaches, which may not be executed through a government mechanism. These approaches can be replicated later if found to be appropriate and feasible.

CSOs can design and implement innovative programs in line with the government's priorities and the SDGs. They can put the people's voice front and center especially on ending poverty and hunger.

Nepal has 753 local governments, which can prepare, implement, and monitor development projects on their own. CSOs can engage with these local governments and bring the SDG agenda to the local level, help raise local governments' awareness of national targets, and suggest local solutions for local problems.

Advocate for the poor

The purpose of CSO engagement as watchdogs or pressure groups is to improve the development of pro-poor government policies, programs, and plans. This also helps in increasing public accountability and transparency.

Many nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and CSOs in Nepal are service providers. In 2000, a paradigm shift took place with some NGOs shifting to advocacy. One successful example of CSOs as pressure groups and advocates is their involvement in abolishing the *Kamaiya* (the bonded labor system). The movement was initiated, mobilized, and ended by the CSOs with support from the bonded laborers and their associations.

CSOs can be a catalyst for critical national, regional, and global reforms. They can help bring citizens' voices and evidence from the ground to national and international attention to trigger change.

Vehicle for creating SDGs awareness

By informing the public and governments, CSOs can play a pivotal role in translating the Sustainable Development Agenda into national priorities. The UNDP has reported that initiatives, such as roadshows, lecture series, and other awareness programs, have not just helped enhance understanding of the SDGs among government officials, CSOs, and the public but also created proactive communities and citizens that will hold governments accountable for meeting these goals.

Human rights defenders

The SDGs should be seen from the perspective of human rights: the goals are an obligation for the government to respect, protect, and fulfill. It is often found that the rights of the poor, women, people with disabilities, indigenous groups, and marginalized and vulnerable groups are neglected. CSOs can form alliances and networks to advocate for the rights of the marginalized and excluded. By working as human rights defenders, CSOs uphold the underlying principle of SDGs: leave no one behind.

Implications

The growth of CSOs and their emergence as prominent actors in the development arena is a promising trend for Nepal. However, there is an urgent need to address the capacities of CSOs to meet the multiple roles they can perform and for the government to create the environment for CSOs to effectively contribute.

Capacity gaps may be divided into two types: technical and internal governance. International NGOs,

United Nations agencies, and other bilateral and multilateral agencies should invest in improving the capacities of CSOs, using a two-pronged approach—support to improve programmatic capacity and support to improve governance.

The constitutional, legal, and overall sociopolitical environment of nations determine the space for CSOs to function effectively, efficiently, and with an accepted level of autonomy. CSOs should have both “invited” and “claimed” spaces in the national conversation on the SDGs. Revitalizing partnerships for the goals (SDG 17) is a way forward for CSOs to gain claimed spaces; however, governments need to do more to create invited spaces for CSOs to effectively contribute.

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