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***"Has civil society helped the poor? - A  
review of the roles and contributions  
of civil society to poverty reduction"***

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## **Abstract**

This paper sets out to explore the achievements of civil society in the area of poverty reduction. The focus is mainly on three domains (1) Advocacy; (2) Policy Change and (3) Service Delivery.

Three case studies illustrate how poverty can be addressed at various levels and through different approaches:

(1) Shack Dwellers International (SDI) operating internationally to advocate for the urban poor's rights;

(2) civil society organizations participating in the formulation of PRSPs to call for pro-poor policy reforms at the national level; and finally

(3) the example of BRAC (formerly the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) providing services to the poorest at the grassroots level.

Drawing on these case studies, the paper explains the keys to success and reasons for failure of civil society organizations in tackling poverty reduction effectively. It concludes by pointing out the challenges faced by civil society in the area of poverty reduction and presents recommendations on 'what is still missing' for civil society to play a more effective role in poverty reduction.

## **Keywords**

Civil society organizations, poverty reduction, Bangladesh, NGOs, advocacy, democracy.

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## 1. Introduction

The 1990s saw many changes as the Cold War ended and globalization began to drive social and economic change. Two of these have particular significance for the subject of this paper. First, the evolution of a global consensus that extreme poverty had to be tackled, culminating in the MDGs. Secondly, the belief that civil society should be a major player in this task – mobilizing communities, delivering services and shaping policies. The question is then: can civil society play a major role in delivering the world's biggest promise, i.e. poverty reduction? Despite the importance of global poverty reduction, no movement has ever been developed around this issue. Why are there environmentalists and feminists but not 'poverty-reductionists'? The growing international interest in poverty reduction results mainly from the efforts of aid and donor agencies and the energies of thousands of civil society organizations – rather than a self-sustaining social movement on poverty. The absence of a committed leadership, the vagueness of the poverty concept and its divisive nature renders it rather difficult to create sharp messages required for social movement mobilization. Given the absence of such a social movement, the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) becomes vital in advocating for, participating in and promoting sustainable poverty reduction. Although many CSOs are currently operating in these three domains, their role initially started in the domain of humanitarian relief. It was only later that national and international NGOs succeeded in widening their development agenda to provide services, lobby for policy change and advocate for the poor's rights.

The aim of this paper is to explore the achievements of civil society in the area of poverty reduction. As both 'concepts' – civil society and poverty – are highly contested, analyzing their relationship is not an easy task. We therefore focus mainly on the role that civil society should, could and did play in promoting poverty reduction. We argue that civil society organizations can promote poverty reduction by pushing for macro-level structural changes through advocacy, lobbying the government for policy change at the national level and directly providing effective services to the poor at the grassroots level. To develop this argument, the paper starts by exploring the different conceptualizations of that role and examining the different domains in which civil society can operate to affect poverty reduction. Our attention focuses mainly on three domains (1) Advocacy; (2) Policy Change and (3) Service Delivery. We present three case studies illustrating how poverty can be addressed at various levels and through different approaches: (1) Shack Dwellers International (SDI) operating internationally to advocate for the urban poor's rights; (2) civil society organizations participating in the formulation of PRSPs to call for pro-poor policy reforms at the national level and finally (3) the example of BRAC (formerly the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) providing services to the poorest at the grassroots level. Drawing on these case studies, the paper explains the keys to success and reasons for failure of civil society organizations in tackling poverty reduction effectively. It concludes by pointing out the challenges faced by civil society in the area of poverty reduction and presenting recommendations on 'what is still missing' for civil society to play a more effective role in poverty reduction.

## 2. Conceptualizing the role of civil society in poverty reduction

Before exploring the different conceptualizations of civil society's role in poverty reduction, it is necessary to briefly define the highly debated concept of civil society. The aim of this paper is not to undertake a conceptual exploration of this term, but to explain which definition of civil society this analysis adopts and why. Defining civil society by differentiating between the civil and 'uncivil' society (Anheier, 2004) is rather problematic since the distinction between what is 'civil' and 'uncivil' is not always straightforward.

### Defining and 'situating' civil society

Civil society is "the sphere of institutions, organisations and individuals located between the family, the state and the market in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests" (Anheier, 2004, 22). The concept is usually associated with a group of people who believe in a cause and form an association or volunteer to defend this cause, i.e. a form of "collective action in search of the good society" (Edwards, 2009, 1). Following this definition, civil society not only could, but even should play an active role in reducing poverty to achieve a 'better' and more affluent and equal society. This is why, it is "cited as a solution to social, economic and political dilemmas by politicians and thinkers from the left, right and all perspectives in between" (Edwards, 2009, 2).

Most of the literature on civil society and poverty reduction, however, focuses mainly on NGOs and sometimes even uses the terms 'NGOs' and 'civil society' interchangeably. It has been argued that "there is a strong tendency for NGOs to simply divorce themselves from civil society in practice while at the same time ... 'monopolizing' civil society, diverting attention from other associations" (Stiles, 2002, 840). This is why it is worth noting that civil society includes not only NGOs, but also faith-based organizations, religious communities, informal groups, cooperatives, recreational and cultural organizations as well as academics and the media. An analysis of the relationship between civil society and poverty reduction (such as this one) should therefore account for the role of such informal civil society organizations in promoting poverty reduction. For example, mosque committees in Islamic countries and temple and burial committees in Buddhist countries usually provide useful services and assistance to the poor. Unfortunately, these services are rarely documented, except in a few ethnographic studies. Given the data limitations, this analysis focuses mainly on NGOs<sup>1</sup>, while acknowledging the role that faith-based organizations and informal groups play in enhancing poverty reduction and pointing to the need for more research on these less visible civil society actors.

In situating civil society vis-à-vis other actors, the 'triadic perspective' has been the most dominant approach. Accordingly, civil society is the 'third sector' vis-à-vis the state and the market with overlapping borders between them. The role of civil society in this model is to correct both market and state failures (Fowler, 2003, 184; Edwards, 2009, 4; Giddens, 2001).

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<sup>1</sup> The term NGOs will be used interchangeably with civil society – as most of the literature does. However, the paper accounts for the role of other forms of civil society organizations in contributing to poverty reduction.

The debate about the 'third way' opened the space to make the most out of the market, the state and civil society. Howell and Pearce (2001) call this triadic perspective the mainstream view as this model conceptualizes the role of civil society as one in which NGOs counterbalances the power of the state and engages in partnerships to bring about change (Howell and Pearce, 2001, 1-3; Fowler, 2003, 187). In this model, the focus of NGOs' activities is "administering welfare to those whom market forces cannot reach" (Pearce, 2000, 39). NGOs thus act to take advantage of the supranational, national and local spaces created through globalization forces and call for new forms of regulating markets in addition to lobbying for change in international regimes in favour of the poor (Pearce, 2000, 39).

This view, however, has been criticized as "the model neither problematizes the relationship of civil society to the market nor does it allow for civil society to have a role in defining what kind of state there should be" (Howell and Pearce, 2001, 2). This perspective not only depoliticizes civil society, but also reduces the concept to a technical tool in the hands of donors (Howell and Pearce, 2001, 2). Edwards (2009) puts it more bluntly by stating that:

"The three-sector model of society implies that states, markets and non-profit groups are separate from and independent of each other – hermetically sealed, perhaps, in their own rationalities and particular ways of working. Yet even a glimpse at real institutions demonstrates that this is nonsense" (Edwards, 2009, 24).

In contrast to the triadic model or the mainstream view of civil society, the 'political or rights' perspective of civil society stresses the importance of citizenship, human rights and democracy. Civil society organizations that operate on human rights-related issues focus mainly on norms and democratic values, while civil society organizations that operate in development emphasize service delivery and talk about sectors, rather than norms. Scholars adopting the 'political or rights' perspective of civil society emphasize the 'democratic check up role of civil society vis-à-vis the state' through which it pushes for state reforms, campaigns against human rights violations and corruption thus rendering the state more accountable and responsive to social needs and thus the needs of the poor. Donors usually embrace this perspective to position civil society against the state and provide assistance to civil society organizations as a means of pushing for state reform (Howell and Pearce, 2003, 13). Donors often have NGO/civil society portfolios (without realizing it) – such as service delivery (BRAC, RDRs), human rights (TOI, ADK), community mobilization (Nijera Kori) and policy advocacy (CPD).

Finally, the 'arena perspective' of civil society focuses mainly on the collective/associational nature of civil society and emphasizes the intrinsic value of civil society as a carrier of values (Perlas, 2000). This alternative vision allows more room for civil society to set its own agenda and views it as an associational expression of people's power (Howell and Pearce, 2001, 2; Fowler, 2003, 185; Edwards, 2009, 2). This 'associational expression' can take the form of NGOs or informal community groups. The relationship between these two forms of 'associational expressions', i.e. between NGOs and community groups, is not straightforward. Sometimes, an NGO can act as an umbrella organization managing different 'pre-existing' community groups and acting as a facilitator between them. The NGO in this case mainly provides technical support to the groups, e.g. in proposal writing and language skills. In contrast, some NGOs deliberately create community groups, such as microfinance and women's groups, to help the poor organize themselves and express their needs. The question

however is whether the role of such 'imposed' community groups in poverty reduction is sustainable or not.

Having reviewed the three perspectives on civil society's role, one can note that civil society is a complex adaptive system constituting "processes of behaviours and relationships by which citizens pursue and defend interests, rights and needs that are important to them" (Fowler, 2003, 187). Its role "as an agent of change creates social, economic and political energy that actually drives processes of reform in and between each of these areas" (Fowler, 2003, 187). This perspective of civil society suits this analysis best mainly because:

"Civil society is an arena to debate and challenge the prevailing ideas of progress and development through active participation in non-formal and non-institutionalised political spaces. Many do not therefore seek merely to strengthen existing democratic institutions or to defend civil society against the state, but to promote **new forms of participation where they can have a say in deciding what form progress and development should take**" (Howell and Pearce, 2003, 15[emphasis added]).

It is this form of participation in fostering progress and development (and more precisely in promoting poverty reduction) that is the focus of this chapter. The emphasis is mainly on civil society as "a universal expression of collective life of individuals" (Edwards, 2009, 3); a way of "rejuvenating public life" (Khilnani, 2001, 11); and a 'space for action' (Van Rooy, 1998). Civil society is viewed simply a means of achieving the 'Good Society' (Edwards, 2009). However, the main question really is: how can this 'big' idea play a 'good' role in development and more particularly in poverty reduction?

### **Role of civil society in development**

It is clear that there is no consensus on the definition of civil society, let alone on its role. Some scholars, for example Pearce (2000), call for a total abandonment of such an exercise, arguing that:

"we ought perhaps to abandon the search for *the* role of NGOs in development, or *the* role of 'civil society', and even such a thing as an uncontested goal of 'development'. We could concentrate much more on discussing the choices for action and the principles and implicit theoretical assumptions that guide them ... This would allow us to assess the real impact of external interventions in situations of poverty and exploitation, and help us to decide where and how to act in the global order" (Pearce, 2000, 40 [emphasis in original]).

Nevertheless, there is a general agreement that "civil society is [somehow] responsible for profound social change" (Oakley, 2003, 32). Accordingly, civil society needs to push for economic reforms, call for accountability and transparency, promote human rights protection, deliver services, combat social exclusion and inequalities, and above all it is responsible for "building constituencies for poverty-reduction, sustainable development and international cooperation" (Oakley, 2003, 33).

Civil society has two main roles: (a) building democracy and (b) improving development (Van Rooy and Robinson, 1998, 43-51). The former address the politics of poverty reduction, while the latter seeks to address poverty reduction directly. Civil society organizations promote

democracy by strengthening good governance; checking the power of the state; stimulating political participation and promoting the protection of human rights and freedoms (Diamond, 1991, 7-11). They create the environment where democracy flourishes and strengthens institutions thus making democracy work for the poor (Van Rooy and Robinson, 1998, 43-51; Sabatini, 2002, 8). Although one cannot deny the importance of civil society's role in promoting democracy, this analysis focuses mainly on its role in 'improving development'; especially on its impact and achievements in the area of poverty reduction.

The next section focuses on civil society's role in addressing poverty reduction by advocating for the poor's rights, lobbying policymakers for pro-poor reforms and directly providing services to the poor and marginalized.

### **3. Civil society approaches to poverty reduction: advocacy, policy change and service delivery**

Civil society can promote development by operating at various levels (local, national and global). In assessing the role of civil society in poverty reduction, one can examine four main dimensions of civil society: (1) its structure; (2) the space in which it operates; (3) the values it advocates; and (4) its impact on policymaking (Anheier, 2004, 29-32). The focus of this analysis is mainly on the values and the impact of civil society organizations operating in the field of poverty reduction, i.e. their ability to advocate for values that promote equity and their role in giving voice to the poor, lobbying policymakers and helping in service provision.

The task ahead is not an easy one mainly because most of the studies that sought to analyse the impact of civil society organizations on poverty reduction yielded ambiguous results. For example, NGOs often succeed in extending services to the poor and in improving their livelihoods; however, the long-term socio-economic impacts of these projects are still questionable. It is also important to note that civil society is by no means a necessity for poverty reduction. Some countries, such as China, Malaysia and Vietnam, witnessed high levels of poverty reduction despite the various state-imposed limitations on their civil society organizations. The authoritarian state in each of these countries succeeded in promoting pro-poor economic growth and improving social indicators, while limiting the space in which civil society organizations operate. In this context, the role of civil society organizations in poverty reduction is rather minimal.

Despite these cases, undoubtedly NGOs can play a role in poverty reduction by 'reaching the poorest' (Lawson et al, 2009); lobbying the state for policy change and providing social services (Van Rooy and Robinson, 1998, 39-42).

While accounting for the important role that civil society organizations still play in providing humanitarian aid (such as Medecins Sans Frontieres), this analysis focuses mainly on three civil society approaches to poverty reduction: advocacy, policy change and service delivery. We argue that NGOs can promote poverty reduction, namely by: (1) pushing for structural and social change [or advocacy]; (2) lobbying the government for pro-poor reforms [or policy



change]; and (3) the provision of basic needs [or service delivery]. The rest of this paper analyses how civil society organizations operate in each of these domains and presents examples of civil society's achievements (and failures) in these domains.

### *Advocacy*

A key domain through which civil society organizations seek to reduce poverty is advocacy. In recent years the success of various well-mobilized campaigns around debt cancellation and fair trade demonstrated the role that advocacy can play in promoting anti-poverty policies. Coates and David (2002) argue that "advocacy work has become the latest enthusiasm for most agencies involved in international aid and development" (Coates and Davis, 2002, 530). NGOs use of advocacy work at all levels is due to a number of reasons. First, their understanding of poverty and deprivation has deepened as they came to realize that despite decades of aid influx the causes of poverty have not been tackled yet. Secondly, the context in which civil society organizations operate has changed as a result of the growing size and capacity of Southern NGOs. As a result, "Southern NGOs and social movements have become more assertive in challenging power structures within their own countries and increasingly at the international level" (Coates and David, 2002, 531). Challenging such power structures is possible through active advocacy campaigns. Thirdly, due to the success of various campaigns such as landmines and debt relief campaigns, Northern NGOs were encouraged to play a new role in advocacy for poverty reduction.

The main question however remains whether these advocacy campaigns in fact have an impact on poverty reduction or not. "NGOs are asking whether advocacy and influencing initiatives are cost effective and whether they are contributing to the fulfilment of their mission (i.e. improving the lives of their intended beneficiaries)" (Coates and David, 2002, 531). A huge amount of NGO effort went into campaigning for reaching the MDG targets, but it is rather questionable whether such advocacy has in fact achieved much.

The aim of this section is to examine the impact of NGOs' advocacy efforts on poverty reduction. Analysing such an impact, however, is difficult as 'advocacy is messy' and hence the change resulting from it is not linear. Advocacy depends on cooperation; this is why its impact cannot be assessed merely by focusing on the one organization in question, but needs to include its cooperating partners in the campaign as well. Finally, the impact of advocacy on poverty reduction is usually long-term hence the need to avoid overemphasizing short-term goals over the less visible long-term aims of anti-poverty advocacy campaigns. To effectively assess the impact of civil society's advocacy efforts, it is also necessary to account for the values pursued, the changes induced and the flexible approach adopted by many NGOs in their advocacy campaigns (Coates and David, 2002, 534-537). Assessing such an impact requires a deep understanding of "the nature of the advocacy process – its multiple aims, multi-layered structures, shifting timeframes, and the nature of the power structures it aims to influence" (Coates and David, 2002, 539).

One of the most famous attempts to challenge the international power structures is the anti-globalization movement which seeks to influence the shape of 'economic restructuring' and present an alternative vision of the 'global world order'. Hintjens (2006) explains that the strength of the movement lies in its belief in the ability of the poor to organize themselves. She adds that "the movement is an attractive source of inspiration and confidence for active,

progressive people of all kinds” (Hintjens, 2006, 629). Advocacy can therefore be considered an effective means of promoting poverty reduction by inspiring the marginalized and the poor to organize themselves and advocate for their own rights. Advocacy movements can promote poverty reduction by bringing the poor’s struggles to public attention, spreading the ‘politics of hope’ and inspiring the poor and disenfranchised by showing that change is – in fact- possible.

In the area of urban poverty reduction, many local and international NGOs also seek to reduce urban poverty by advocating for citizens’ rights and pressuring local authorities to provide the adequate infrastructure, services and land tenure to the poor (Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004a, 18). Advocates of urban poverty reduction mainly focus on the poor’s land-use rights, on landlord-tenant relations as well as on the rights of informal workers and women in squatter areas. However, for NGOs to effectively advocate for the urban poor’s rights, they need to strengthen the bargaining power of these groups to defend their own rights and to enhance their capacity for organization and collective action. Mitlin and Satterthwaite (2004b) explain that:

“poverty reduction requires more than an official recognition of the poor’s needs. *It has to include strengthening an accountable people’s movement that is able to renegotiate the relationship between the urban poor and the state (its political and bureaucratic apparatus at district, city and higher levels), and also between the urban poor and other stakeholders*” (Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004b, 282[emphasis in original]).

One of the challenges faced by NGOs engaged in advocacy for the poor is their reluctance to accept that the groups of the poor sometimes develop as alternatives to professionally driven solutions. It is therefore essential that NGOs, while operating in the advocacy domain, view their role mainly as supporters and facilitators and do not “take on what individuals and community organizations can do on their own” (Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004b, 283). NGOs advocating for the rights of the poor need to be accountable and operate in full transparency vis-à-vis the poor groups whose rights they defend (Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004b, 283). Advocacy NGOs can thus help the poor not by speaking on their behalf, but rather by helping them express their voices, articulate their needs and defend their rights effectively.

### *Policy change*

In addition to advocating for the poor’s rights, civil society organizations often lobby the government for specific reforms to render policies more pro-poor. They seek to induce policy change by pursuing a number of strategies. First, they try to monitor the government and its resource allocation in favour of the marginalized, e.g. by calling for participatory and gender budgeting. Secondly, they try to raise a public debate around poverty-related problems so as to influence policy design, build new alliances, gain new supporters and encourage policymakers to establish programmes to address these problems. For example, in Peru thanks to the indigenous peoples’ movements, indigenous peoples have the right of prior consent before economic activities take place on their lands (Bebbington et al, 2009, 11).

Many NGOs start with local authorities bringing the problems of the poor to their attention and seeking policy changes that would directly enhance the livelihoods of the poor. They work with local councils to gain their acceptability and use a non-confrontational approach to ensure that their suggestions are listened to (Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004b, 286). NGOs operating in this domain are usually pragmatic and seek to cooperate with political parties so long as they are

interested in helping the poor. Through partnerships with state agencies and by establishing a supportive institutional environment, NGOs can successfully scale-up their initiatives thus ensuring their sustainability and wide reach. Mitlin and Satterthwaite (2004b) point out two ways in which NGOs can 'convince' policymakers with this scaling-up: (1) by establishing pilot projects to "show alternative ways of doing things" and (2) by starting a dialogue between local (and national) policymakers and communities about these projects (Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004b, 288). Civil society organizations thus can affect the formulation of poverty reduction strategies by building a 'working relationship' with their respective governments.

Their success in affecting poverty reduction strategies however depends on a number of factors. First, the political context and the role of external actors in the formulation of poverty reduction strategies are important determinants of the NGOs' ability to influence policy change. Secondly, Hughes and Atampugre (2005) explain that "although NGOs are working effectively to deliver services and care to poor and vulnerable groups and are improving their capacity to manage poverty issues at the community level, they lack the structures and mechanisms to work at the policy level" (Hughes and Atampugre, 2005, 13). This is how, the participation of civil society organizations in policy processes can become merely 'tokenistic' (Hughes and Atampugre, 2005, 17).

To improve civil society's performance in the domain of policy change, it is important to build the capacity of civil society organizations. They need to understand policy processes better, access information more effectively and improve their advocacy, monitoring and evaluation skills. To effectively lobby the government for policy reforms, it is also necessary that civil society organizations build partnerships and bridge the gaps between their staff, local communities and policymakers. Strengthening such networks enhances the success of NGOs to push for pro-poor policy changes. Civil society organizations can thus succeed in inducing pro-poor policies by realising their strengths and weaknesses, enhancing their understanding of poverty and poverty-reduction, creating a sense of government accountability, building their own capacities and forming alliances with other civil society organizations (Hughes and Atampugre, 2005, 19). They need to effectively use the space that they have to empower their citizens and to push for new policies that benefit the most marginalized amongst them.

### *Service delivery*

In addition to advocacy and policy change, civil society organizations seek to help the poor through service delivery. Rahman (2006) argues that "the NGO sector as a whole has shifted away from its initial focus on promoting political mobilization and accountable government, to the apolitical delivery of basic services" (Rahman, 2006, 451). In their mapping of South African social movements, Mitlin and Mogaladi (2009) also point out that these social movements were concerned with various problems related to poverty reduction, such as shelter, human rights, labour, gender and the environment. To address these problems, they focused mainly on service delivery, especially the restoration of land to those who have been evicted (Mitlin and Mogaladi, 2009, 21-22). In urban contexts, civil society organizations seek to help the urban poor by allowing them access to credit, improving their homes and their surrounding infrastructure as well as providing services, especially through 'slum-and-squatter' upgrading programmes. Through service provision, NGOs contribute to urban poverty reduction by "often fulfilling the role that government agencies should provide – for instance, provision of water,

waste removal, healthcare or the support of centres that assist particular groups (such as centres for street children)” (Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004a, 18).

However, one of the problems that NGOs face in their service delivery to the urban poor is the lack of sustainability of such services because of the NGOs’ high dependence on external funding, the difficulty of ‘going to scale’ and their inability to recover costs through user charges. For effective service delivery in urban areas, Mitlin and Satterthwaite (2004a) call for an integrated approach whereby NGOs combine community and state support thus working with community groups to improve their conditions while nurturing their relationship with the local government (Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004a, 18).

Another problem of the service-delivery approach to poverty reduction is the shifting of responsibility and accountability and the lack of sustainability that it could cause, if it fails to reinforce the government’s responsibility to provide adequate and efficient services to the poor. Collier (2000) argues that:

“The direct provision by NGOs of goods and services must not lead poor people to expect less of their governments. On the contrary, NGO projects should promote popular organization and the capacity of poor people to assert their claims to public resources, and to hold government accountable” (Collier, 2000, 122).

Criticizing the needs-based model, Hulme and Edwards (1997) also express their concern for NGOs’ focus on service delivery. They explain that the problem is not what is included, but rather what is excluded from this approach, especially the capacity of poor people to organize themselves. They therefore call on NGOs to ‘return to their roots’ to promote poverty reduction more effectively arguing that service delivery might sometimes lead to the empowerment of the NGO personnel and local leaders rather than the poor and marginalized (Hulme and Edwards, 1997, 7-20)<sup>2</sup>.

Surveying 16 civil society groups in Latin America and examining the effectiveness of their activities, Sabatini (2002) questions the capacity of CSOs to act as channels for empowering the poor and disenfranchised pointing out that most of the studied groups are rather elitist with limited membership (Sabatini, 2002, 13). This is why, he questions the credibility and authenticity of these groups and emphasizes the limitations of this kind of civil society to promote any sustainable change in the lives of the poor (Sabatini, 2002, 17-18). Many such NGOs fail to promote poverty reduction as they are opportunistic formed merely to seek out external funding and design their agendas only to accommodate donors’ needs rather than addressing the needs of the poor. Many such NGOs are not internally democratic and fail to promote participatory decision-making processes even within their organizations (Hulme and Edwards, 1996, 966; Bebbington and Thiele, 1993, 57; Sabatini, 2002, 9).

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<sup>2</sup> Hulme has become a revisionist as he no longer perceives the NGOs’ focus on service delivery as a problem. Counter to expectations, NGOs did not merely adopt a needs-based service delivery approach (as Hulme and Edwards, 1997 feared), but instead the past decade witnessed a growth in NGO operations in ALL three domains: advocacy, policy change and service delivery.

Nevertheless, it is still believed that civil society organizations somehow have a comparative advantage over governments and donors in providing services to the poor. Their size and outreach brings them in close contact with the beneficiaries of service-delivery projects. However, Robinson (1992) argues that the empirical evidence shows such a comparative advantage does not always exist in reality. Evaluating the performance of 16 NGO projects in the area of rural poverty reduction, he concludes that “three-quarters of the projects were successful and had an impact in alleviating poverty” (Robinson, 1992, 30). Nevertheless, he points out a number of limitations on these achievements, such as: (1) the limited sustainability of NGOs’ service delivery projects; (2) the limited cost-effectiveness of these projects; and (3) their inability to reach the poorest (Robinson, 1992, 30-34). Rahman (2006) also warns that the adoption of the service-delivery approach by many NGOs can lead to the ‘franchise state’ where crucial public services are run by NGO funded programs rather than the state (Rahman, 2006, 455). Therefore, successful NGOs’ interventions to reduce poverty through service-delivery should be associated with high levels of communal participation, strong management and skilled committed staff (Robinson, 1992, 34). The role of NGOs in the domain of service delivery should therefore be viewed as complementary to the government and supportive to local communities. In addition, NGOs operating in the service delivery domain need to emphasize the long-term effects of their projects by asking “how will this have to work in the future, after we leave?” (Collier, 2000, 121). The answer to this question is crucial not only for the continuity of the provided services, but also for the sustainability of their poverty reduction impact on the targeted communities.

### **Interlinkages between the three domains**

After exploring each of the three domains through which civil society organizations can affect poverty reduction, it is important to point out the interactive relationship between these domains. Before doing so, it is interesting to note that these three domains correspond to Korten’s (1987) identification of three NGO generations. David Korten (1987) pointed out three ‘generations’ of NGOs representing three different domains in which their programs can operate: (1) relief and welfare; (2) local self-reliance and (3) sustainable systems development. The first generation provides relief and delivers services to the poor, while the second generation addresses the causes of inadequate service provision by focusing on strengthening community capacities and promoting local development (Korten, 1987, 147-149). The third generation NGOs are concerned with the larger institutional and policy contexts at the national level and work with the government to ensure the efficient allocation of resources to the poor. Although each of these generations represents a different NGO orientation, they are not mutually exclusive. Korten (1987) argues that most NGOs will seek to adopt a ‘third generation’ orientation to promote policy reforms at the macro-and micro-levels (Korten, 1987, 150).

In contrast to Korten’s argument, this analysis does not view the three domains of NGO’s operations as a progressive continuum, but rather considers them as different interactive spaces through which NGOs can affect poverty reduction. Accordingly, advocacy and service delivery are two interdependent domains in which civil society organizations operate to achieve positive impacts on poverty reduction in rural and urban areas. On the one hand, service delivery can create the necessary knowledge base for advocacy work because NGOs providing services to the poor are in a better position to collect the necessary data needed to lobby for policy change. On the other hand, those NGOs operating in advocacy need to make sure that they do not to ‘lose’ touch with the grassroots. NGOs operating in service delivery also should

be careful not to adopt an exclusively needs-based approach that neglects the poor's rights and fails to challenge the structures and institutions that brought about their deprivations in the first place. The danger here is that NGOs in service provision might sometimes seek to maintain these exploitative structures which provide them with funds to finance their projects. Given these potential disadvantages of focusing merely on one domain, this chapter calls for an integrative and collaborative approach among civil society organizations operating in the field of poverty reduction. This approach can allow them to use the data and experience gained through service provision not only to call for wider policy changes in favour of the poor, but also to advocate for structural transformations that can help sustain the gains from their operations in the other two domains.

Thus, while addressing poverty reduction, CSOs need to adopt practical and strategic actions, the former focuses on short-term practical solutions to the problem, while the latter addresses the long-term and more political dynamics that perpetuate the problem. Focusing on practical solutions, however, should not undermine the importance of taking strategic steps towards reducing poverty.

#### **4. Case studies: civil society's achievements in advocacy, policy and service delivery**

After exploring the three domains through which civil society affects poverty reduction, this section examines three case studies to demonstrate the achievements as well as the limitations and challenges encountered by civil society organizations in each of these domains. The first case study examines Shack Dwellers International (SDI) which successfully advocates for the rights of the urban poor internationally. The second case study presents the different experiences of civil society organizations engaged in the formulation of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) to lobby for pro-poor policy reforms. The last case study is that of Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), the largest NGO in Bangladesh which succeeded in providing a variety of services to the landless and the poorest groups in Bangladesh. Through these three case studies the chapter demonstrates how civil society organizations can operate at the international, national and local levels to reduce rural and urban poverty through advocacy, policy change and service provision.

##### **Advocating for the urban poor's rights: the case of Shack Dwellers International**

This case study focuses on civil society's advocacy efforts to address urban poverty at the national level. It presents the experiences of Shack Dwellers International (SDI) and examines its success in building international partnerships and lobbying governments to protect the rights of the urban poor. This organization was selected as "it describes the evolution of ... national federations and how they grow to challenge conventional development thinking and to develop new, community-directed precedents for poverty reduction" (Patel, Burra and D'Cruz, 2001, 45). The case of SDI demonstrates not only how different organizations can lead and help each other, but also how they can work with state and global institutions to advocate for the urban poor's rights (Patel, Burra and D'Cruz, 2001, 45- 47).

In 1996, a number of federation representatives from six Asian countries, four African countries and one country from Latin America came together in South Africa to create an international network to advocate for the rights of the urban poor (Patel, Burra and D'Cruz, 2001, 47). Slum/Shack Dwellers International was established as a network of various organizations: SPARC (Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres), the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) and Mahila Milan (a network of urban women working with NSDF) in India, the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights in Bangkok and the Homeless Peoples Federation in South Africa in addition to various partners in 11 countries representing more than one million

urban poor. The governing structure of SDI comprises of national and regional federations of the urban poor (mostly women) in addition to a governing committee with five federation representatives and two representatives of partner NGOs (Batliwala, 2002, 403).

The main advocacy goal of SDI is to end the coercive means of slum clearance and to push for state recognition to the urban poor's needs (Batliwala, 2002, 404). To advocate for the poor's rights, however, SDI does not take up the leadership, but rather plays a supportive role in monitoring public policy, mobilizing the urban poor and creating new databases through settlement surveys. SDI aims at developing "leadership amongst the urban poor so that they themselves could lead the negotiations with the state and its agencies to extend and obtain entitlements" (Patel, Burra and D'Cruz, 2001, 47). Its main activities therefore focus on building and strengthening the community-based organizations of the urban poor and helping them find and implement community-led solutions to their housing and livelihood problems. The network uses saving and credit schemes to help the urban poor with housing loans and nurtures the social capital among them (Batliwala, 2002, 403; Patel, Burra and D'Cruz, 2001, 47). It also supports the poor in their negotiations with local authorities and central government, esp. to secure land tenure and provide adequate housing and infrastructure.

Another crucial activity of SDI is its data collection such as community-led enumeration of local residents as well as the conduct of surveys and mapping of slums. SDI is mainly a learning network based on the 'horizontal exchanges' and the sharing of knowledge on urban poverty among its members (McFarlane, 2006, 288). Through mutual visits, community organizations/federations exchange their experiences in fighting urban poverty. Their success is therefore based on their mutual learning and strategic partnerships. By sharing their experiences and learning from each others' practices in addition to keeping a cooperative relationship with the state, SDI had great successes in the area of advocacy. The network has gained wide acceptance by government and local officials in each country it operates. Through these federations, poor communities also succeeded in identifying their needs and built effective alliances to "put pressure on local officials and politicians for change to support more community action" (Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004b, 288).

There are a number of reasons for the success of SDI in fighting global urban poverty. Although one of the critiques against civil society organizations operating in advocacy is their questionable representation and their lack of legitimacy (Edwards, 2001, 146), SDI successfully overcame this problem. Its mass base allowed it to enjoy high levels of legitimacy and representation. Batliwala (2002) explains that "when SDI ... leaders represent their movement in any forum, it is clear to all concerned that hundreds of thousands of their members are standing behind them" (Batliwala, 2002, 404). SDI has thus reinvented its relationship with its grassroots actors. Its democratic nature and internal accountability system allowed it to 'score highly' in legitimacy and accountability (Edwards, 2001, 148). SDI managed to create a partnership between the organization and the groups it represents in which "each brings to the engagement a different source of power, but that power is recognized and acknowledged by the other" (Batliwala, 2002, 406). In addition, "most of the leaders of the movement come from within the communities concerned" (Edwards, 2001, 148). This is how; SDI is a legitimate representative of the urban poor groups.

Secondly, the organization is successful due to its 'gendered' approach. It is women-driven but does not exclude men. Instead it focuses on promoting women's savings and credit groups and helps them negotiate with the state and international organizations (Batliwala, 2002, 405). Thirdly, SDI's success is also due to its wide international recognition, this is why it is invited to participate in a number of conferences, seminars and negotiations related to urban poverty. SDI even became a partner with the UNCHS (United Nations Centre for Human Settlements) in the Global Campaign for Secure Tenure (Patel, Burra and D'Cruz, 2001, 52). Nevertheless, its main focus is not donor-based projects, but rather policy change that allows local and national government institutions to respond effectively to the needs and priorities of the urban poor in each locality (Satterthwaite, 2001, 135-138). Despite this global recognition, SDI's main emphasis is on specific problems in specific contexts and hence global policy advocacy has secondary importance. Edwards (2001) describes SDI's global activities as the 'icing on the

cake' "layered on top of local and national campaigns instead of displacing attention to distant international institutions" (Edwards, 2001, 149).

Fourthly, one of the main reasons for SDI's success is its use of knowledge and research to support its advocacy activities. McFarlane (2006) argues that "SDI seeks to place the knowledge and capacities of the poor at the centre of development initiatives" thus creating a "development process driven by the knowledge of the urban poor" (McFarlane, 2006, 288). It creates knowledge not only through training programmes of exchanges, saving schemes, model house building and the enumeration of poor people's settlements, but also through the slum census data that allows SDI to lobby for new resettlement policies (McFarlane, 2006, 288; Batliwala, 2002, 404). For SDI, "knowledge is conceived as embedded in the lives and experiences of the poor themselves", it is situated and context specific and is based on practice (McFarlane, 2006, 294). Although the knowledge of the poor is placed at the centre of SDI's developmental approach towards poverty reduction, the organization – in its fight against urban poverty - does not exclude knowledge 'from outside'. Instead, it engages with this knowledge and merges it with local knowledge and the urban poor's experiences (McFarlane, 2006, 301). Through its focus on knowledge creation, SDI demonstrates how activists can in fact initiate research and gather data which is used strategically to lobby for policy change and call for people-centred solutions. This knowledge also helps SDI representatives to come up with specific strategies and solutions rather than simply presenting the problems of the urban poor (Batliwala, 2002, 405-407).

Undoubtedly, SDI is a success story due to its growing size and its widespread impact on the urban poor's lives (Batliwala, 2002, 407). In the area of policy change, SPARC successfully lobbied for a change in building regulations to suit the needs of the poor. It even participated in the design of a new national policy to legalize and improve the housing conditions of the urban poor in Mumbai. As a result of the ongoing advocacy efforts, urban communities were granted the right to determine the location, timing and form of their resettlement (Patel, Bolnick and Mitlin, 2001; Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004b, 288).

Finally, the main lesson learnt from the experience of SDI is its creation of an empowering mind-set among its members that encourages them to proudly call for their own rights rather than viewing themselves as exploited and poor. SDI's main objective is to let the poor's voices be heard directly simply because no one is better equipped to speak for the poor than the poor themselves. However, "there is a widespread recognition that until the time when the urban poor themselves are ready to be in the forefront, NGOs will assist in all the negotiations" (Patel, Burra and D'Cruz, 2001, 54). One can therefore conclude that:

"what was unconventional about the strategy was that the aim was to make community-based organizations the leading force in the struggle against poverty, with NGOs playing a supportive role, helping link people's organizations with mainstream governmental or private institutions, and acting as researchers and fundraisers" (Patel, Burra and D'Cruz, 2001, 48).

The case study of SDI demonstrates how civil society organizations can help the poor sustainably by focusing on community learning, spreading knowledge and exchanging experiences among the urban poor. SDI is successful because it uses exchange learning as its development tool which "helps people ...build the capacities to deal with the root issues of poverty and homelessness and to work out their own means of participating in the decision-making that affects their lives...It is learning without an agenda, on-site and vital learning, direct from the source, unfiltered" (Patel, Burra and D'Cruz, 2001, 59). What is unique about SDI is also the fact that "the locus of power and authority lies and is kept in the communities themselves rather than in intermediary NGOs at the national and international levels. This is partly because SDI and its counterparts ...aimed to promote practical solidarity, mutual support and the exchange of useful information about development strategies and concrete alternatives among their members" (Edwards, 2001, 145-146).



## **Lobbying for policy change: the case of CSOs' participation in PRSPs' formulation**

This section focuses on the attempts of civil society organizations to participate in the formulation of PRSPs. Before analysing this case study, however, it is important to note that civil society organizations have been invited to participate in the PRSP process instead of them initiating this participation. This participation is thus the result of a top-down process imposed by the World Bank. Some might therefore consider it a 'public relations exercise' and a means of transferring responsibility of the policies that leads to their false legitimacy (Fraser, 2005, 318-319). Nevertheless, this case study was selected because the "introduction of the PRSP as an alternative way of doing business has established participation as a key factor in creating effective national level policies and programs that reduce poverty and enhance equitable growth" (Donnelly-Roark, 2002, 4).

The aim of this case study is therefore to examine the role of civil society organizations in formulating the PRSPs and the extent to which they succeeded or failed through this participation to lobby for policy change in the area of poverty reduction. There are a number of aspects that can help measure the effectiveness of civil society's participation in PRSP, such as: (1) the channels of participation; (2) the availability of information and (3) the policy areas and decision-making stages in which this participation took place (Stewart and Wang, 2003, 7). The impact of the consultation process can also be assessed by examining the institutional design of the process itself and the extent to which the government is committed to it (Molenaers and Renard, 2002, 5). These factors will be assessed when analyzing the role of civil society organizations in formulating PRSPs in Bolivia.

Endorsed in September 1999, PRSPs are "policy documents produced by borrower countries outlining the economic, social and structural programmes to reduce poverty, to be implemented over a three-year period" (Stewart and Wang, 2003, 4). They define the national government strategy to reduce poverty and need to be country-driven, comprehensive and result- and partnership-oriented (Christiansen and Hovland, 2003, vii-3). Recipients of debt relief under the HIPC (Heavily Indebted Poor Countries) initiative need to produce a PRSP to be eligible for concessional loans from the IMF and the World Bank. The production of these documents needs to be based on 'an acceptable participatory process'. The PRSP is meant to allow civil society organizations, such as NGOs, churches, unions etc., to be partners in the design of poverty reduction strategies (Stewart and Wang, 2003, 5; Molenaers and Renard, 2002, 2; Fraser, 2005, 317-318).

In the case of Bolivia, the government initiated a National Dialogue (ND) in 1997 which was later linked to the PRSP process. As a result, between June and August 2000 nation-wide consultations took place at the municipal, departmental and national levels and benefited from the Law of Popular Participation issued in 1994 (Molenaers and Renard, 2002, 5). The Dialogue was divided into a social, economic and political agenda and discussions focused on issues of poverty reduction, income distribution and debt relief (Molenaers and Renard, 2002, 6-7; Curran, 2005, 4-5). While the first PRSP focused on the provision of services to the poor, the second PRSP in 2003 emphasized the importance of employment, productivity and commodity chains – raised by civil society in the first PRSP (Curran, 2005, 7). To effectively participate in the PRSP process, CSOs depended mainly on experiential evidence to complement the technical knowledge of the government.

Assessing the impact of CSOs (civil society organizations) on policy change in Bolivia is not easy. The impact of CSOs on the first PRSP process was negligible as the issues raised by civil society were rarely included in the final document as a result of "the lack of a clear link between the consultation processes and the creation of the PRSP document" (Curran, 2005, 7). The level of participation in Bolivia was also limited due to the overlapping spaces of participation and the limited organizational capacities of civil society organizations in addition to the inadequate information sharing and the failure of civil society organizations to form a unified advocacy front (Surkin, 2005). In addition, the topics discussed in the National Dialogue were narrow, the timeframe of the discussions was tight and the language in which they were held was Spanish not the indigenous languages. To overcome these shortcomings, the church led a

parallel consultation process, the Jubilee Forum, to discuss the causes of poverty and sent its recommendations to the government. The state, however, was not committed to engaging civil society in the PRSP process and refused to discuss macro-economic issues. As a result, the consultation process raised the expectations of CSOs and led to social unrest and frustration when the state failed to meet these expectations. CSOs expressed this frustration by sending a formal petition to the government expressing their disapproval of the PRSP document (Curran, 2005, 4-9).

However, this is not to say that there was no positive impact of CSOs' participation in the PRSP process in Bolivia. The two most significant achievements of civil society's participation is the establishment of the National Social Control Mechanism (SCM), proposed by CSOs. This mechanism allows civil society organizations to monitor the allocation and implementation of the HIPC funds and to follow up on the implementation and reformulation of the PRSP (Curran, 2005, 8-9). The Law of National Dialogue also guaranteed that the consultation process will be repeated every three years to supervise the use of the HIPC resources. This law also had a positive impact on decentralization which allowed for better allocation of resources to poorer municipalities in addition to institutionalizing civil society organizations' participation in policy formulation at the local level (Molenaers and Renard, 2002, 8). In addition, through its research, CSOs also succeeded in providing evidence to the government to push for policy change and were good at criticizing the existing policies. However, their limited capacities did not allow these civil society organizations to offer alternative policy choices (Curran, 2005, 9). This is why, there is "a need within Bolivia for local level think-tanks to work with mass membership national organisations to strengthen their capacity to propose policy choices" (Curran, 2005, 9).

To affect policy change through the PRSPs process, generally, CSOs faced a number of challenges, such as the limited time frame, the limited information availability, the language barrier as well as the urban bias (Stewart and Wang, 2003, 12-14). In many cases, CSOs were excluded from drafting the PRSPs and "CSOs have rarely been able to engage in the design of frameworks" (Stewart and Wang, 2003, 15). Curran (2005) explains that this mainly because of the limited capacities of CSOs which affects their understanding of complex policy processes and renders them unable to engage actively in the policy discussions. In addition, the top-down nature of the approach limited the mobilization of CSOs around the PRSP (Curran, 2005, 3). As a result, civil society organizations became participants in 'precooked' proposals for policy change; dominated by urban and professional groups (Fraser, 2005, 326). In some cases, the PRSP processes were also used by CSOs as a platform to promote their own business (Eberlei, 2007, 13).

Despite these limitations, many civil society organizations viewed this consultation process as a "transformation process, which turned their attitude from 'Protesta' (protest) into 'Propuesta' (proposal)" (Molenaers and Renard, 2002, 8). It set the stage for a long-term engagement of civil society in the formulation of poverty reduction policies and institutionalized their participation. Despite its limited impact on the content of the PRSPs, CSOs' participation has mainly affected the quality and widened the spectrum of poverty analysis by demonstrating the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and emphasising the need for people-centred policies (Stewart and Wang, 2003, 16-17). One can therefore argue that "the PRSP offers an excellent opportunity for CSOs to engage in the policy process. For many CSOs, this was their first experience of advocacy work on policy issues and the process itself contributed to strengthening their capacities" (Curran, 2005, 2).

Nevertheless, the PRSP process still cannot be regarded as a long-term channel of civil society's participation in policy. In Bolivia, for example, "although the Bolivian participatory process falls nothing short of an impressive exercise ..., the results are heavily marked by the fact that it was externally imposed on the government that at the same time had all the leeway to organize it the way it saw fit" (Molenaers and Renard, 2002, 12). This top-down nature of the PRSP process undermines its credibility and questions its long-term prospects as an effective process that allows civil society to push for sustainable pro-poor policy reforms. The process can best be considered as a starting point through which strong civil societies will push

democratic and development processes forward in a pro-poor direction. One can therefore argue that:

“the PRSP process offers an excellent opportunity for CSOs to engage in discussions with governments on policy choices. However, the realities of the process have, in general, shown that this potential is not fulfilled” (Curran, 2005, 17).

Despite its limited impact, participation still is crucial because it strengthens civil society, enhances their political performance and accountability and enhances the effectiveness of poverty reduction strategies (Molenaers and Renard, 2002, 21). One cannot deny that the participation in the municipal planning empowers civil society organizations and helps them to monitor the implementation of poverty reduction strategies. For civil society, however, to play a more effective role in PRSP, there is a need for increased government commitment to participatory processes, improved access to information and enhanced capacities of civil society organizations (Surkin, 2005). Civil society organizations also need to build their own capacities and invest in “grassroots-based national-level policy monitoring and analysis (quantitative and qualitative), in order to ensure evidence-based advocacy can be carried out” (De Barra, 2004, 34).

As for the lessons learnt, first, this case study shows how the PRSP process can be a forum for enhancing the ability of CSOs to use evidence to lobby for policy change. To influence poverty reduction policies, CSOs, however, need to build their activities on relevant, timely and valid evidence. Curran (2005) explains that:

“the PRSP does provide an excellent entry point into the policy processes but there is work for CSOs to do to make sure that their contribution to the process will continue to improve. An important part of this will be for CSOs to invest the time and resources into carrying out thorough research at the local and national level to ensure that evidence-based advocacy work around the PRSP process is able [to have] a positive impact on the policy choices and content of the PRSP” (Curran, 2005, 2).

The second lesson learnt is that CSOs participation in the PRSP formulation is a learning process that can enhance their capacities to effectively engage in policy dialogues around poverty reduction issues in the future. To enhance the impact of CSOs on the PRSPs, it is necessary to allow sufficient time for the consultations and to ensure the adequate representation of different stakeholder groups. In addition, the coordination and cooperation between CSOs and the government needs to be improved. Governments need to be convinced of the value of CSOs participation in the PRSP process and should view CSOs as equal partners. The mistrust and competitive relationship between CSOs and the government needs to be overcome through open information-sharing, transparency and decentralization (Hughes, 2002, vii).

Thus, despite its limitations, the PRSP process can be viewed as transformative as it allows CSOs to set the agenda of poverty reduction thus leading to their gradual empowerment. To enhance the impact of this process on the actual poverty reduction strategies, most of the assessments of the PRSP process argued for the need for greater participation and the active involvement of civil society in the implementation and monitoring of the PRSP (Painter, 2002; Marcus and Wilkinson, 2002; German et al, 2002; McGee et al, 2002). For participation to be effective, it should be in different phases of the PRSP formulation: negotiation, initiation, engagement, action and commitment phases. In the negotiation phase, civil society should seize the opportunity of participating in policy formulation and in the initiation phase, it should set the poverty agenda. In the engagement phase, it should identify the priorities and the action phase should involve civil society organizations in the implementation of poverty reduction policies (Donnelly-Roark, 2002, 4-5). Through dialogue, action and regular monitoring, CSOs can use the PRSPs process as an effective space for affecting policy change in favour of the poor.

### **Providing services to the poor: the case of BRAC in Bangladesh**

In addition to advocacy and policy processes, many civil society organizations prefer to help the poor directly through service provision. This section presents the experience of BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) which effectively delivers services to the poorest in Bangladesh. BRAC is one of the largest NGOs in Bangladesh with a multi-layered structure and different organizational groups at the national, regional and local levels. A number of previous studies sought to assess BRAC's impact on poverty reduction (Mustafa et al., 1996 and Husain, 1998) focusing on its success to deliver services to the poor.

Through its innovative services in education, health, agriculture and income generation, BRAC succeeded in bringing about lasting change to the lives of millions of poor people. The case of BRAC was chosen as "unlike Grameen Bank, BRAC is not well-known outside Bangladesh, but that will change because BRAC is undoubtedly the largest and most variegated social experiment in the developing world" (Smilie, 2009, 1). It is "the developing world's largest NGO in terms of the scale and diversity of its intervention" (Chowdhury and Bhuiya, 2004, 371). Four million children (70% girls) graduated from its schools, millions benefited from the services of its health services and its micro-credit schemes have loaned more than US \$1 billion. BRAC also helps the poor through rigorous research that enhances the productivity of the poor's enterprises, e.g. new systems of chick rearing, poultry vaccination and improved cattle breeds (Smilie, 2009, 2-3). BRAC is worth careful examination because "it turns standard notions about development, business, poverty alleviation, and management on their head. And it confronts the idea that the drivers of development in poor countries must inevitably come from abroad, above, or some other place than the midst of the people who are to be developed" (Smilie, 2009, 3).

Founded in 1972, BRAC was a charitable organization to help in Bangladesh's reconstruction after the country's liberation war. Its main task was the resettlement of refugees and the provision of humanitarian relief and rehabilitation to the refugees. These humanitarian efforts were later developed to provide more permanent solutions to help vulnerable groups, such as women, fishermen and the landless (Lovell, 1992, 23; Chowdhury, Mahmoud and Abed, 1991, 4; Rahman, 2006, 454). The main idea of the founder, Fazle Abed, was to organize the poor and empower them (Stiles, 2002, 842). This is why, BRAC's development strategy stresses the importance of empowerment and conscientization, encourages participation and self-reliance and adopts sustainable and people-centred approaches with a special emphasis on vulnerable groups, such as women and the poorest (Lovell, 1992, 24-33). Its organizational structure is 'flat', i.e. with few intermediate levels between top management and field implementation to enhance accountability, flexibility and feedback opportunities (Lovell, 1992, 35).

BRAC helps the poor form their organizations not only through income and employment generation, but also through awareness-raising and human resource development. Its goal is to create an enabling environment for the poor by promoting gender equity, human rights; enhancing their access to education, health care, housing, adequate technology, minimum income and employment, in addition to ensuring their entitlement to food and assets and nurturing their savings. To create this enabling environment, BRAC's poverty reduction programme includes: the formation of village organizations by the poor, micro-finance schemes, training on human rights and legal issues and non-formal education for children (Chowdhury and Bhuiya, 2004, 373-376).

BRAC's largest program is the Rural Development Program (RDP). The program is aimed at building viable organizations of the poor; improving their living conditions and nurturing their entrepreneurial capabilities. These goals are achieved mainly through conscientization, training, institutional-building, credit support and ongoing technical and logistical support (Chowdhury, Mahmoud and Abed, 1991, 5). Most of the activities start with functional educational training courses for the villagers who are then encouraged to participate in various income generating activities. BRAC's contribution to poverty reduction is also mainly due to its Income Generation for Vulnerable Group Development Program (IGVGD) which provides training and support to women who are on government relief (Lovell, 1992, 43). Devised in 1986, IGVGD is a comprehensive package of services including food distribution, savings, micro-credit and skill

training. Its aim is “to use a combination of food aid, savings and training in activities with low capital requirements as a means of enabling the marginalized to climb the ladder out of ultra-poverty” (Halder and Mosely, 2004, 387). The program has been very effective in reaching the ultra-poor and has successfully “deepened the outreach of its poverty-reduction activity and achieved impressive results” (Matin and Hulme, 2003, 647).

In addition, BRAC also runs a Rural Credit Project (RCP) to serve the graduates of the RDP program and help them through a variety of credit and saving activities. However, unlike the Grameen Bank, BRAC does not simply extend credit to the landless without collateral; instead it institutionalizes a comprehensive development program for the poor and encourages their collective activities (Chowdhury, Mahmoud and Abed, 1991, 11). Assessing the village-level impact of BRAC’s micro-credit program on the rural poor, Khandker, Samad and Khan (1998) conclude that “these programmes have positive impacts on income, production, and employment, particularly in the rural non-farm sector” (Khandker, Samad and Khan, 1998, 96).

In 1991, BRAC established its own educational program, Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) (Lovell, 1992, 48-50). As a result, “its extensive network of schools ...provide[s] more nonformal education than the government” (Stiles, 2002, 843). In the health sector, in addition to providing its own health services, BRAC has also been cooperating with the government to improve the national health system (Lovell, 1992, 58). It particularly seeks to meet women’s health needs by establishing health facilities for birthing women to ensure that they receive quality care (Afsana and Rashid, 2001, 79). The focus of BRAC’s health services is on preventive measures and primary health care in addition to specialized programs, such as the nationwide oral rehydration therapy program and its women health and child survival programs (Lovell, 1992, 60-62). A study on the impact of BRAC’s child survival program reveals that “there has been a substantial reduction in mortality during the post-intervention period; however, the reduction was much greater for infants whose mothers participated in the development programme compared to infants of non-participant mothers from similar socioeconomic background” (Bhuiya and Chowdhury, 2002, 1553). BRAC’s health services are mainly community-based and innovative and include the health insurance, the distribution and manufacturing of essential drugs and the promotion of home-made oral rehydration solutions (Streefland and Chowdhury, 1990, 263). In addition to these effective health services, BRAC’s flexible structure also allows it to respond effectively to the poor’s needs at times of emergency and natural disasters, such as floods and cyclones. BRAC, however, is not only an NGO; it is also a business corporation with its own businesses, such as Aarong shops, printers, cold storage facility and garment factories (Lovell, 1992, 69-72).

This case study demonstrates the diversity of BRAC’s activities. The complementarity of these activities is one of the reasons for the organization’s success. The services provided by BRAC not only meet the needs of the poor, but also complement each other. For example, income generation activities are supported by credit schemes and these schemes are backed by training courses in addition to different educational and health programs to ensure the sustainability and continuity of these activities. One can therefore conclude that “the design and implementation strategies of each of the programs can be understood only when viewed in relation to the whole complex of interlocking needs of the village poor, and to the other programs that have been designed in response” (Lovell, 1992, 73). BRAC’s poverty reduction strategy is thus not merely dependent on micro-credit, but depends on several channels to reduce poverty and vulnerability through different paths, such as income generation, asset building and helping the poor to meet their immediate consumption needs (Matin, Hulme and Rutherford, 2002, 286-287). Another reason for BRAC’s success is the fact that “the target group of BRAC are those poor men and women who sell their manual labour for survival and who are landless” (Chowdhury, Mahmoud and Abed, 1991, 10). This focus on the poorest makes BRAC’s impact on poverty reduction highly remarkable.

Through its innovative projects, comprehensive programs and empowering interventions, BRAC succeeded in challenging the conventional development orthodoxy and adopting a people-centred approach that promotes local participation and enhances the capacity of vulnerable groups such as the landless. Although BRAC’s main focus is on service delivery, this analysis

showed that it is “gradually moving beyond a ‘supply side’ approach, concentrating on the delivery of services or development projects, to a ‘demand side’ emphasis, helping communities articulate their preferences and concerns so as to become active participants in the development process” (Clark, 1995, 593). This is how it succeeded in achieving high levels of poverty reduction and reaching the poorest of the poor.

## **5. Conclusions**

As civil society and poverty are contested, varied and broad concepts, drawing conclusions on their relationship is rather difficult and might even be impossible. This is mainly because what civil society does to reduce poverty and what it achieves varies across civil organizations and across countries.

### **Lessons learnt, keys to success and limitations**

Nevertheless, the previous analysis demonstrates that the success of civil society in promoting poverty reduction is dependent on a number of factors. First, the quality of the relationship between the poor and the civil society organizations is crucial for civil society organizations to direct their resources and efforts and to address the deprivations of the poor. It is obvious that:

“the extent of success also depends upon the extent to which such organizations have resources or decision-making powers that can support urban poor groups, and on the space given by such organizations to urban poor groups in defining priorities and developing responses – or, more fundamentally, .... in actually conceptualizing participation” (Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004b, 289).

Secondly, poverty is multi-dimensional; this is why any NGO strategy to tackle it also needs to be multi-faceted. Mitlin and Satterthwaite (2004b) point out the need for NGOs to address the various ‘aspects of poverty’. For example, to address the inadequate income aspect, civil society organizations can help the poor by providing them with relevant training and skills to access better paid jobs; widening their possibilities for self-production; extending a safety net through public works programmes; and lobbying for a change in government regulations with regards to land use, in addition to providing them with better and cheaper services. The inadequate and unstable asset base of the poor can be addressed through emergency and asset-building credit schemes, nurturing of social capital for communal access to resources as well as focusing on improving the poor’s access to housing, safety nets and education. To overcome the problem of inadequate shelter, civil society organizations can help the poor access new land sites and reduce the building costs in addition to lobbying the government to legalize the ‘shacks’ (Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004b, 291). The deteriorating infrastructure and social services are two other problems that NGOs can address by increasing the capacity of local governments to improve this infrastructure and providing the poor with adequate income and credit to help them pay the connection and user charges. The poor lack security, this is why, NGOs need to lobby for the establishment of safety nets, especially for vulnerable social groups. Finally, through advocacy and policy reform, civil society organizations can also protect the poor’s rights, enhance their bargaining power and help them overcome their lack of voice. This is how NGOs can affect poverty reduction when they respond to the poor’s needs in a

flexible way, support their organizations and develop accountability to the poor's groups (Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004b, 290-295).

Thirdly, civil society organizations need to 'personify' the values that they stand for. While calling for democracy, development and social justice, NGOs need to demonstrate that their organizations adopt these values in their own activities. The relationship between civil society and poverty reduction is not always 'straightforward', this is why it is important to examine "whom does civil society represent? [and] how can the voices of the poor and vulnerable be articulated in civil society?" (Howell and Pearce, 2001, 235).

Fourthly, the achievements of civil society in the area of poverty reduction should be considered with caution as civil society is not a one-size-fits-all concept and it is still dominantly elitist in many respects. NGOs, while pursuing certain 'normative goals', often need to deal with conflict of values (e.g. traditional vs. modern) to achieve their targeted outcomes (Pratt, 2003, 197-199).

Fifthly, the success of civil society organizations to tackle poverty depends on their adoption of an integrative approach that combines all the three domains: advocacy, policy change and service provision. The analysis demonstrated the complementary and mutually reinforcing relationship between each of these domains. Such an integrative approach can enhance the impact of civil society organizations on poverty reduction.

Sixthly, the case studies of SDI and CSO's participation in the PRSP process revealed the importance of knowledge and mutual learning in enhancing the effectiveness of civil society's role in poverty reduction. This knowledge helps CSOs not only to design better targeted poverty reduction policies, but also to enhance their bargaining power and their credibility when calling for pro-poor reforms.

The achievements of civil society in the area of poverty reduction are not always easy to identify. However, it is clear that the operation of CSOs in this field can itself spread a 'politics of hope' and an empowering mind-set that inspires the poor and renders them keen to voice their demands. NGOs, however, should not lead this process, but rather act as facilitators thus leaving enough space for the poor to express their needs.

For civil society organizations to play a more effective role in poverty reduction, they need to overcome a number of limitations identified in this analysis. First, they need to move away from a needs-based approach to an integrative approach that respects the rights of the poor and helps them improve their living conditions in a sustainable way. Service delivery programs managed by NGOs should not replace government services, but rather complement and strengthen them – as was the case with BRAC. Secondly, successful advocacy for the poor's rights should be based on adequate knowledge and deep understanding of the poor's needs and demands. Thirdly, the impact of CSOs on policy change is limited so long as they maintain a competitive and mistrustful relationship with their respective governments. For civil society organizations to play an active role in poverty reduction, they need to cooperate not only with the government; but also to coordinate the own activities, thus creating a unified front that lobbies for sustainable pro-poor national policies. To do so, CSOs also need to build their own capacities and improve their skills to be able to actively engage in policy dialogues, adequately present the poor's problems and effectively offer alternative policy choices that help improve the lives of the poor.

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