

## Associates

### **The Challenge of Democracy-building: Practical Lessons on NGO Advocacy and Political Change\***

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

Political change in many countries has created new opportunities to expand international NGO activities from economic and social development to political reform. ‘Democracy and governance’ has emerged as a sector in the field of international development extending the scope of training and technical assistance provided by Northern NGOs to include civic and voter education, advocacy, political party strengthening, legal reform and human rights promotion. While rule of law and elections are cornerstones of a democratisation package for state reform, it remains uncertain and contentious what it actually takes to strengthen civil society. The absence of an agreed upon set of norms and approaches for revitalising civil societies breeds a wide variety of projects and programmes, and questionable results.

Many US-sponsored democracy programmes transplant American models for citizen participation and policy influence with limited regard for historical, political and cultural differences. As a result, some programmes have little impact, or worse, have negative consequences. For example, some US lobbying strategies may reinforce autocratic leadership and decision-making patterns unless equal attention is given to broadening and strengthening citizen participation. Often short-term policy gains are achieved at the expense of long-term sectoral and institutional development, which is essential for enabling nascent NGOs to hold their governments accountable in the long run. Without an emphasis on organisational development and maintenance, citizens groups will find it difficult to sustain their efforts or be influential participants in the political process.

To be effective, the momentary opportunities created by political transitions call for well-balanced strategies and cautious external interventions. Elections and new constitutions mark the first step in political reform but are insufficient for creating responsive governments and engaged civil societies. Cultivating democracy involves transforming social and political values and behaviour – a gradual, complex process which should be driven by domestic players and stakeholders to ensure relevance and sustainability.

This chapter looks at some of the challenges involved in supporting the role of NGOs to be effective actors in strengthening civil society and contributing to democratisation. It draws on the experience of a North-South collaboration involving advocacy training with groups working on rights and women’s issues in Uganda, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Ghana, Russia and Poland and with a coalition of US NGOs working in development. The lessons about political change and strengthening civil society emerging from this project raise questions about current programme strategies and invite NGO practitioners to evaluate and refine thinking and practice.