

Engaging CSOs, Respecting Governments

ADB contacts with CSOs are a supplement to, and not a substitute for, government dialogue with citizen groups. The setting of national development priorities and explaining them to the public (including explanations provided through CSOs) is the responsibility of the government concerned.

Government–CSO relations vary greatly from country to country and from one government to the next. In a few countries, CSOs are viewed as opponents of the state, and relations are therefore adversarial. In other cases, government and CSOs may share similar goals and work closely with each other. In between are governments that tolerate CSOs without being particularly supportive, or governments that may align themselves with some CSOs while opposing others.

Given the great diversity within the CSO sector, a government's relationship with any individual organization depends greatly on that organization's specific activities, purpose, ideology, and institutional or personal ties.

Most governments understand and accept that ADB must have relations with CSOs, and some actually encourage such relations. Authorities tend to appreciate CSO involvement when the organizations can offer services that complement government activities. If a government objects to ADB relations with CSOs, staff members should explain the rationale for such contacts. CSOs often believe that ADB can play the role of "honest broker" in bridging differences between the government and civil society.

In cases in which a CSO proposes that ADB take an action that should rightfully be carried out by the government, staff members should encourage the CSO to take its views and proposals to the relevant national or subnational authority. Depending on the circumstances, it may be appropriate for staff members to facilitate dialogue between CSOs and governments.

In settings in which the government is wary about ADB's engaging CSOs, staff members may consider apprising the government of meetings with CSOs that have been planned, or inviting officials to arrange and participate in such discussions. However, in climates in which CSOs fear reprisal in response to sharing views that do not coincide with official government positions, the CSOs may wish to meet alone with ADB staff members.

Many difficulties that operational CSOs encounter in ADB-financed projects while working with governments, particularly local authorities, result from a lack of consultation during the selection process. Government officials also are sometimes concerned about the effectiveness of CSOs compared to private consultants operating within roles relating to project implementation.

An OED study of CSO involvement in ADB operations determined that constraints on CSO involvement could have been reduced by (i) assessing the effectiveness of the legislative and regulatory environment for CSO involvement; (ii) examining the capacity of CSOs to engage in policy dialogue with the government; (iii) assessing the working arrangements that exist between the executing agency, CSOs, and ADB; and (iv) analyzing the institutional capacities, memberships, governance, and financial management systems of CSOs. Tensions between governments and CSOs could be mitigated through front-loaded capacity-building activities that ensure that national and local governments can effectively manage CSO inputs. Such activities also tend to improve understanding among partners.¹⁶

¹⁶ ADB. 2006. *Special Evaluation Study of the Involvement of Civil Society Organizations in ADB Operations*. Manila. June.

Tips on Addressing Government Sensitivities Concerning CSOs

- Highlight the benefits of broader participation and the potential contribution of CSOs to the national development strategy.
- Cite examples of successful projects carried out with CSO support within the country.
- Point to positive government-CSO collaboration in other nations.
- Ascertain government sensitivities that relate to working with CSOs and attempt to assuage these concerns.
- Arrange meetings that bring together ADB staff, government officials, and CSO representatives.
- Encourage CSOs to strengthen their rapport with government agencies.
- Interact with reputable CSOs that place a high value on accountability.
- Steer clear of CSOs that take an overtly partisan stance or that play an active role in politics.

