

NPRS-PRF

Helping Accelerate Poverty Reduction in Asia and the Pacific

ENCOURAGING TRIPARTITE COOPERATION IN THE GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION

Past decades have demonstrated the significant role that civil society has to play in poverty reduction and social change in Asia and the Pacific. There has been a huge growth of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the region, particularly in the form of nongovernment organizations (NGOs) dedicated to work on a variety of social issues—such as gender equality, ethnic minority rights, environment, poverty, HIV/AIDS, health care, and access to housing.

Demands for broader engagement in development initiatives by CSOs have increased as governments and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) recognize the importance of CSO participation in poverty reduction planning and implementation.

ADB has collaborated with CSOs for almost 2 decades. National and international CSOs perform an independent monitoring and advocacy role, promoting public participation in projects and transparency and accountability in both government and ADB operations.

Experience has shown that CSO participation in ADB projects is more dynamic in countries where the CSO sector is more developed, or where the government provides effective regulatory mechanisms that encourage partnerships with civil society groups.¹ In the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), ADB's cooperation with CSOs ranges from CSO participation in consultation and information-sharing activities, to a more substantive involvement in actual implementation and monitoring activities.²

However, a recurring issue in ADB-CSO cooperation is the timing and scale of CSO inputs in ADB operations. CSOs have requested ADB to ensure that collaboration occurs at all stages of the program and project cycles. This includes a request to move cooperation activities further upstream to the conception and design phases. This would ensure that civil society's inputs are integral to and inform the design process.

Facilitating Tripartite Partnership in Regional Cooperation Strategy and Program Development

A regional technical assistance (RETA) 6118, Promoting NGO³ Support for Poverty Reduction in the Greater Mekong Subregion

(GMS),⁴ sought to facilitate a tripartite partnership among governments of the GMS countries,⁵ CSOs, and ADB. This partnership intended to contribute to enhancing poverty reduction efforts in the GMS.

The key outputs under the RETA include a paper on GMS poverty issues incorporating civil society perceptions and an operational plan for CSO participation for the ADB-Government-CSO partnership in the Regional Cooperation Strategy and Program (RCSP).

A major goal of RETA 6118 was to explore ways in which CSO involvement could move upstream to the conceptual stage of strategy and program formulation. An important component of this was for CSOs to provide inputs in preparing and implementing the GMS RCSP⁶ and the Country Strategy and Programs (CSPs) for the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) and Viet Nam.

The preparation of the RCSP provided the backdrop for RETA 6118. It was substantially influenced by inputs from both the governments and CSOs that participated in the tripartite meetings and workshops.

The GMS government officials recommended closer alignment with national development plans and more attention to farm-based and off-farm rural livelihoods. They supported a focus on infrastructure while noting the need to pay attention to social and private sector capacity building.

The CSOs, on the other hand, proposed more emphasis on generation of employment and development of local markets in the RCSP, as well as the environmental and social implications of infrastructure and other investments to spur economic growth, including potential negative impacts on ethnic minorities and women and girls.

As a result, the RCSP was reoriented to emphasize cross-border issues including trafficking of people, wildlife and drugs, and spread of infectious diseases (malaria, avian flu, SARS, HIV/AIDS). Environment and natural resource management was also placed as a major pillar of the strategy, with the program focus on GMS Biodiversity Corridor with multiple implementation and financing partners and a flood mitigation program being implemented in collaboration with the Mekong River Commission.

RETA 6118 also influenced planning and preparation of the new CSPs for Lao PDR and Viet Nam where CSP-initiating concepts were discussed with CSOs at country-level workshops.

Lessons Learned

A main aim of the RETA was to demonstrate means to promote collaboration between ADB, governments, and CSOs. The RETA was successful in this. The process adopted in the RETA served not only to promote greater trust and understanding among the three groups but also to encourage substantive input in developing the GMS RCSP. The tripartite model was disseminated and recommended to other subregional cooperation strategy development in ADB as a standard model. Specific lessons include the following:⁷

1. *Input from CSOs can improve the quality of strategy and programming.* This was noted in the RCSP/CSPs and their updates. Input from CSOs contributed to a greater focus on social and environmental issues and ensured that concerns regarding implementation were considered at an early stage.
2. *Information and communication are crucial.* Limited knowledge of the mandates, operations, and activities of parties, including ADB operations, appears to have previously constrained opportunities for partnership.
3. *A tripartite consensus-building process is essential.* Combining CSO views with those of governments and ADB broadens the opportunities for a holistic approach, particularly given CSO expertise and insights on impact at the community level. Incorporating CSOs' views and experience early on helps early identification of issues that may arise during implementation, which in turn means they can be more easily mitigated.
4. *Engagement is most productive when it is consistent, regular, and structured.* A structured context for engagement enables participants to learn, make substantial contributions, feel valued, and allows the results of contributions to be tracked.
5. *Representation and the mechanisms through which groups collaborate need to be appropriate and sensitive to all participating.* It is important to provide for adequate representation of CSOs from different country and sectoral contexts, while ensuring that all participants are able to engage constructively with each other.
6. *Next steps need to be identified to ensure that civil society engagement continues beyond the life of the RETA.* Developing improved arrangements for engagement of CSOs in projects is a significant, long-term challenge that ADB faces. Identifying steps that can be more readily implemented in the short to medium term is necessary.

The RETA put forward the following options for advancing tripartite cooperation in the GMS and other subregional cooperation support:⁸

Establishment of tripartite working arrangements

This option proposes to establish Tripartite Advisory Working Groups (TAWGs) composed of representatives from ADB, governments, and a select number of CSOs. There are two possible arrangements: (1) TAWGs at both country and subregional levels; or (2) TAWGs only at the country level serving as an interface for identifying both country-level and subregional issues, strategy development, and programming.

Upstream CSO engagement in ADB strategy development and programming

Enhanced CSO participation in the process of RCSP and CSP preparation and updating produced many benefits. Mainstreaming these arrangements within ADB operations and expanding the level of CSO participation could build on and reinforce these successes.

Enhanced participation of CSOs in the GMS Program

Increased CSO participation in the GMS Program would contribute to more focused and relevant cooperation on poverty reduction initiatives in the subregion.

Endnotes

- 1 Participation of the Civil Society in Public Decision-making (www.adb.org/Governance/good_gov_pcspd.asp)
- 2 World Vision Australia. 2006. Promoting NGO Support for Poverty reduction in the GMS. Final Report Regional technical Assistance (RETA) 6118. Manila: Asian Development Bank (ADB).
- 3 While the technical assistance (TA) title continues to reflect the initial narrow focus on NGOs, this focus has been expanded to incorporate a broad cross-section of civil society organizations, not only nongovernment organizations (NGO). This breadth of focus represents a wider recognition in ADB of civil society's diversity.
- 4 TA duration: August 2003–December 2005; RETA amount \$150,000.
- 5 Cambodia, People's Republic of China, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam.
- 6 ADB's Regional Cooperation Strategy and Program for the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and the individual country strategies and programs complement and reinforce the GMS Economic Cooperation Program (GMS Program). This Program promotes cooperation between its six constituent countries on subregional issues.
- 7 See footnote no. 2.
- 8 See footnote no. 2.

This case study was written by Social Development Direct (RETA Consultant) under the Regional TA 6270: Facilitating Knowledge Management for Pro-Poor Policies and Projects with inputs from Christopher Hnanguie, Project Officer of RETA 6118, and Sonomi Tanaka, Senior Social Development Specialist, ADB. The views and assessments contained herein do not necessarily reflect the views of ADB or its Board of Directors or the governments they represent. ADB does not guarantee the accuracy of the data and accepts no responsibility for any consequences of their use.

For any queries, contact:

NPRS-PRF Secretariat
nprs-prf@adb.org

