

On: 13 June 2007
Access Details: Free Access
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Development in Practice

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713412875>

Whom do international donors support in the name of civil society?

Christopher A. Sabatini

To cite this Article: Sabatini, Christopher A. , 'Whom do international donors support in the name of civil society?', Development in Practice, 12:1, 7 - 19

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/09614520220104248

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09614520220104248>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article maybe used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

© Taylor and Francis 2007

Whom do international donors support in the name of civil society?

Christopher A. Sabatini

International funding of civil society organisations within the framework of support for democratisation processes has increased significantly in recent years. Yet this raises a set of questions quite apart from the effectiveness of the activities of the recipient organisations. Who are these groups? Whom do they represent? What effect does international funding have on their organisational workings and their rootedness in their local societies and political systems? This article presents the results of a survey that examined the sources of financing, level of organisation, domestic constituencies, and relationships to political parties of 16 civil society groups in Latin America that received support from the National Endowment for Democracy in 1999. It finds that while the groups demonstrate a remarkable diversity in their sources of funding, all of them receive the lion's share of financing from international donors. The author argues, however, that given the scant possibilities for domestically generated funding, this dependence is to be expected. The article concludes with a series of questions about the meaning of international support for local groups in developing democracies and the potential effects it may have on de-linking such groups from their broader political and party system.

Introduction

Support for civil society groups has become an increasingly important part of US democracy assistance efforts in Latin America. In 1999 alone, the US bilateral agency USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) invested nearly US\$22.4 million in support of NGOs in the hemisphere in areas such as judicial reform, human rights, and local government. Beyond the concrete benefits these groups may provide in terms of promoting state reform and advocating for human and political rights, donors also see them as important to a vibrant civil society in Latin America, and an essential component of stable democratic systems.

Support for these groups as civil society organisations (CSOs) raises a set of questions quite apart from the effectiveness of their activities. Who are these groups? Whom do they represent? What effect does international funding have on their organisational workings and their rootedness in their local societies and political systems? This article presents the results of a survey that examined the sources of financing, level of organisation, domestic constituencies, and relationships to political parties of 16 civil society groups in Latin America that received support from the NED in 1999. The survey found that while the groups demonstrate remarkable diversity in their sources of funding, all of them receive the lion's share of financing from international donors. The article argues, however, that given the scant

possibilities for domestically generated funding, this dependence is to be expected. The article concludes with a series of questions about the meaning of international support for local groups in developing democracies and the potential effects it may have on de-linking groups from their broader political and party system.

The debate about civil society and donor assistance

International assistance to civil society has become a central and much debated focus of development assistance. As Van Rooy details, donors have come increasingly to rely on civil society as a means to promote a variety of ends: economic development, socio-economic and political equity, human rights, and democratisation (Van Rooy 1999). Even within the narrower sector of promoting democracy, donor strategies and emphases vary, from supporting initiatives to strengthen the advocacy roles of individual organisations to supporting groups that promote civic education and values. For example, USAID tends to take a more instrumentalist approach, focusing within the broader category of civil society on civic advocacy groups as a means to promote and consolidate specific democratic reforms. Other donors, such as the OECD or the EU, tend to focus on human rights organisations more generally (Van Rooy 1999). Nevertheless, embedded within these explicit strategies is often a broader and longer range view, frequently based on a variety of philosophical and ideological perspectives, from an understanding of civil society as a means to 'make demands on the State and hold State officials accountable' (Diamond 1994:5), to seeing civil society as an engine for increasing the participation of the poor and promoting social change (Macdonald 1997:19–22). Thus, quite apart from the specific reforms that civil society can achieve, donors which seek to promote democracy, including US donors, often see civil society as an end in itself.

Much of the official and non-official US assistance to NGOs under the civil society rubric is guided by a fairly standard definition of civil society. Generally speaking, donors such as USAID and NED define civil society as: 'an associational realm between state and family populated by organisations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values' (White 1994:379). The definition and the way in which donors apply it to democratisation programmes carries with it a series of assumptions about the benefits of civil society to democratisation. These can be boiled down into several fundamental assertions: that civil society groups help to broaden political participation by bringing in previously marginalised groups such as women, rural residents, and the indigenous; that civil society serves an important advocacy role in promoting necessary state reforms; and that CSOs, by bringing people together in cooperative ventures, teach civic values such as compromise, cooperation, and trust.

Increasingly, however, critics are beginning to question the extent to which donor-supported organisations really fulfil these functions, and if they really constitute the CSOs that scholars dating back to de Tocqueville have described as essential to democratic life (Carothers 1999; Isaacs 1999; Macdonald 1997). Many of these authors contend that international assistance has tended to focus on élite-dominated groups with limited support in society and weak or non-existent internal democratic mechanisms for making decisions. Carothers, for example, argues that foreign donors, particularly US funders, tend to concentrate on advocacy groups that represent only a narrow slice of a country's civil society. Instead of more home-grown groups that have sprung up from locally defined interests or demands (church groups, cultural or hobby groups, and other non-political associations), donors have tended to concentrate, intellectually and in terms of funding, on groups that are dedicated to advocating issues which

donors consider to be important, such as human rights, monitoring of elections, and civic education, and on organisations that are 'well-matched to receive donor funds' (Carothers 1999:212). This search for groups that work on the issues that donors define as a priority tends to lead them to local leaders who are often 'young and western-oriented persons who speak English and are also fluent in the new international lingo of civil society' (ibid.:212). Noting that most of the donor-supported civil society groups depend on international support, several writers such as Edwards and Hulme (1996a:966) and Bebbington and Thiele (1993:57) have contended that the availability of foreign funding has fostered 'opportunistic NGOs' who either formed with the primary function of seeking out external financial support or adjust their programmes and organisation to the interests of donors.

Similarly, Isaacs (1999) asserts that donors' assistance to CSOs has tended to create an international civil society élite. As they argue, the lure of international funds has drawn internationally savvy entrepreneurs to form organisations that are little more than a personal fiefdom dominated by a group of individuals who have become, in effect, career civil society leaders. As a result, the organisations remain shallow, dependent on the ideas, contacts, and vision of one leader or a small set of leaders, thus retarding their broader institutional development. Alternative leadership within the organisation is limited, and decisions are often taken by one leader. This phenomenon raises concerns about the organisation's institutional maturity and capacity to exist beyond the life of its founding leader.

Another similar criticism is that many of the CSOs that donors support in the name of democracy are themselves not internally democratic. Bebbington and Thiele (1993) and Wellard and Copestake (1993) find that, despite their stated intentions, many such groups have failed to establish participatory mechanisms for internal debate and decision making (Edwards and Hulme 1996a:965). While some writers fault the organisations themselves, others blame international agencies for creating organisational distortions that distract CSOs from their primary constituency, the poor. Edwards and Hulme (1996b) argue that there is an inherent tension between the constituency of an NGO, which they imply should be the poor, and its relationship with international donors. In these cases, the conditions placed on assistance—reporting, organisational development, and the need to recruit English-speaking leaders who can seek out foreign contacts—can distract NGOs from their original mission and their primary constituency. The risk is that groups become more accountable to international donors, what Edwards and Hulme term 'upward accountability', rather than to their base, or what they term 'downward accountability' (1996b:279).

There is also the question of the partisanship of these groups. Carothers argues that donors often unrealistically discourage organisations from being partisan. He terms this non-partisanship an illusion since similar advocacy groups in the USA are often partisan (Carothers 1999:221–222). Edwards and Hulme argue that the effectiveness of NGOs requires them '[to become] embroiled in partisan politics and the distortions that accompany the struggle for state power' (1996b:5–6). The implication is that being non-partisan weakens the effectiveness of civil society strategies, particularly when the tasks imputed to CSOs are inherently political, and even partisan. Indeed, the relationship between civil society and party politics in developing democracies is in general poorly understood and under-theorised. Most of the recent scholarship has tended to focus on political parties and civil society as distinct phenomena. The relationship between the two and the possibilities for a growing civil society to rejuvenate political parties, however, is becoming particularly salient in Latin America in the context of declining trust in political parties and, in some countries (e.g. Peru and Venezuela), the collapse of party systems.

The conclusion that many of the writers draw is that these internationally supported groups are different from the civil society groups that have been described as being so crucial to

democracy. Instead, given the nature of international funding and the organisational distortions that it promotes, these groups represent something in between: élite-dominated NGOs that often have limited roots in society and are somewhat removed from the more basic demands of a broad segment of society, and therefore have little of the impact, or perform few of the functions, of 'real' civil society groups.

Surprisingly, however, few of the authors cited above provide much real data or evidence about the groups that they mention. Most of their conclusions are based on single sets of observations, and there has been little effort to differentiate among groups. Only a limited effort has been made to look across the wide variety of organisations in a way that will allow us to make more informed conclusions about donor-supported CSOs in a given region. Doing so may not only tell us more about the organisations that receive international assistance, it may also force us to examine some of the inconsistencies and flawed assumptions in how the donor community views civil society in both developed and developing countries and how it understands its role in political systems.

Methodology

This article examines CSOs that were supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). I leave aside an evaluation of their specific advocacy activities to focus on the organisations' characteristics in what are often assumed to be the inherent benefits of civil society: increasing the sphere of independent activity, broadening participation, and serving as an important associational realm between individuals and the state. In order to answer these sets of questions, I distributed a questionnaire to NED-financed CSOs in Latin America, a total of 16 groups working in Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela. While the sample is admittedly small, it does allow some comparisons of the groups that one donor works with in Latin America as well as revealing their own vision of the work they do and their relationships to international donors. Of course, the results may not apply to the wide spectrum of groups that receive funding from many of the other international donors that provide financial and technical assistance to CSOs in Latin America: the Ford Foundation, USAID, the Organisation of American States (through the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy) and the other non-US agencies such as the German party foundations, the EU, and European governments. Nevertheless, it provides a modicum of insight into a sample of groups that work in this area (many of which also receive money from the organisations mentioned above) and perhaps the unintended effects of donors on domestic politics.

The NED is a private, independent grant-making institution that receives an annual appropriation from the US Congress. It is governed by a board of directors that makes all final grant-making decisions. Its assistance is primarily financial, in the form of direct grants. Though this article only examines groups working in Latin America, the NED also maintains programmes in Asia, Africa, Eastern and Central Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East. All grants are for one year, but can be renewed for up to five years. In Latin America, grants range from US\$40,000 to US\$80,000. The average grant received by the groups surveyed in this study was US\$50,000.

The 16 groups work in a variety of areas. Six are active primarily in human rights and the promotion of judicial reform, three work with local government, assisting local government officials and community groups to collaborate better in local projects. Two groups provide assistance to other local CSOs, one in their communication strategies and another in promoting improvement in the laws governing independent organisations. One works in the area of anti-corruption, teaching children and university students in ethics and how to combat corruption. One works to protect freedom of the press through a network of journalists that provides

political and legal assistance in the case of an attack against a journalist. One works in civil–military relations, conducting classes on democracy and civil–military relations in the officers’ schools, and holding roundtables for military officers and civilian officials on military administration and budgeting. Another is a young people’s organisation that monitors federal and state legislative bodies. And one conducts research on policy areas, such as decentralisation and economic reform, for political parties and policy makers. Despite these differences, the groups share one common thread: they are an example of foreign-supported CSOs, and in many ways typify many of those organisations in the developing democracies of Latin America that define themselves as ‘the new civil society’.

The criticisms raised in the literature cited above can be distilled into four themes, within each of which we can identify a separate set of questions:

Level of organisation

- How well developed are these organisations in terms of their leadership/decision-making structures?
- How well rooted are they in local populations?

Membership

- Who are the leaders of these organisations?
- What is the extent of their membership?

Dependence on foreign funding

- How dependent are they on international sources of funding?
- How does foreign funding affect their development, strategy, and role in domestic politics?

Political parties

- How partisan are they?
- How do they relate to political parties?
- How do they relate to the state?

A questionnaire in Spanish posing a series of questions in these areas was e-mailed to the grantees in January 2000. The response rate was over 80 per cent. The results from all 16 of the groups that responded are included below. In most cases, the questionnaires were answered by the organisations’ directors, though often in consultation with project managers.¹

Organisation and membership

I begin this section with a brief discussion of the history of the organisations and their areas of work. From there I move on to explore their levels of institutional development, using leadership turnover as a proxy for their institutionalisation and the formal, participatory structures for decision making as a proxy for the internal level of democratisation. I conclude with a discussion of their leadership and membership.

Despite a common perception that many donor-assisted CSOs are of recent (and foreign) creation, most demonstrated a fairly long history of working in democracy issues. The average

age of the organisations surveyed was ten years, with some having been formed two decades ago and others created as recently as four years ago. Within the span of their organisational lives, most (12 of the 16) have always worked on issues related to democratisation.

In their current activities, nine of the groups continue to work exclusively on issues related to democracy, from civil society strengthening, civic education, judicial reform, and promotion of a free press to facilitating the political participation of rural or young people. Nevertheless, seven of the organisations do appear to represent a somewhat unwieldy mix of objectives, working in areas such as health, population, economic development and development planning, education, agriculture, and the environment. For the latter, democracy-related work represents, on average, only 50 per cent of their programmes. Arguably, these groups may constitute what Bebbington and Thiele refer to disparagingly as the opportunistic NGOs. A better term for them in democracy-related work could be development re-treads; all of these groups were large, multi-faceted NGOs that encompassed a variety of initiatives, not all of them directly related to democracy promotion but rather a series of development programmes. As I mention below, these omnibus donor-funded organisations are also those that have gone the longest without a change in leadership, indicating a possible trend in institutional development—or lack thereof.

In terms of the organisational structure, most groups demonstrated a fairly complex means of internal governance and selecting new leaders. All had formal processes for oversight and decision making and all except three had had a turnover of leadership since their founding. All of the groups were governed by a board of directors, and half had a general assembly comprising the organisation's members, in addition to the board. The existence of the board demonstrated a degree of internal democracy and accountability; in every case, the boards were made up of the organisation's directors and a roster of leading political figures.

At least at the level of leadership, the organisations have established fairly routine processes and structures for making decisions and selecting leaders. In every case, the president and directors of the organisations are named or elected by their boards, and most, but not all, have lived beyond their original founder. On average, the groups had experienced two changes in leadership. When one factors in the age of the organisation, the average term in office of an organisation's director was about five and a half years.

But there were some notable exceptions. Three of the groups, all of which had been in existence for ten years or more, still had the same president. In those three cases, one person formed the group, and the contacts with the international community and the vision of the group depended on this one personality. It is no coincidence that all three of these organisations were also those that I referred to earlier as development re-treads—groups that had taken on a series of initiatives not directly related to democracy. At least at a preliminary level, one can discern a pattern between a lack of leadership turnover and the more strategically dispersed CSOs.

None of the groups surveyed is what could be called a mass-based organisation. With the exception of two, they had an average of 22 members. The only exception to these rather shallow membership rolls was a student organisation in Mexico that boasts up to 1500 members in universities throughout the country.² Clearly, these are not groups that have an actively engaged core constituency. Instead, they seemed to fit the definition, in donor parlance, of intermediary organisations. At least in the case of the NED groups, the results bring into question the assumption that is often made about all CSOs being able to serve as channels for the participation of the disenfranchised.

The majority of the groups also tended to be élite based in terms of their leadership and staff. All of the leadership had a first and often a postgraduate degree, and in every case except two, the staff were also university educated, and most had lived and/or studied in the USA or

Europe. Only 4 of the 16 groups did not have one of its leaders who had studied overseas. Given the levels of education of the countries in which they worked, it is impossible to say that the leadership and staff of these CSOs are anything approaching a reflection of the prevailing demographic composition.

But does it mean because the leadership and staff of these organisations are more educated and better travelled that they are somehow less legitimate representatives of their societies or the broader public good? While these numbers do cast serious doubt on the depth of the participation in these groups (and thus their capacity to enfranchise the masses), it does not mean that they are any less legitimate as CSOs or as defenders of the rights of the disenfranchised. CSOs in developed countries, particularly in the USA from where many donors draw their rosy conceptions of civil society, are often more educated and better travelled than the constituents they represent. From liberal think-tanks to welfare advocacy groups to literacy organisations in the USA, most such groups are staffed and led by people who are significantly better educated than the constituents they claim to speak for and on whose behalf they work. As Schattsneider wrote about civil society in developed countries: 'The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent' (Schattsneider 1975). The same might also be expected of CSOs in developing countries, but this does not necessarily imply cynicism or lack of legitimacy.

Indeed, it may be too much to expect that groups that advocate for broad public goods must be broadly inclusive. Broad-based social movements are the exception rather than the norm. The rich literature on social movements demonstrates that the formation and institutionalisation of broad-based political movements emerge from a particular conjuncture of factors. These factors include: the ability of a group or an issue to forge a collective sense of identity among a subset of the population, the general political opportunities in the system to effect change and build alliances, the specific goals of a movement, and the organisational resources of the groups themselves (McAdam et al. 1997). Thus, different contexts, issues, and the groups that promote them will generate varying levels of popular mobilisation.

Under authoritarian or semi-authoritarian régimes, human rights and democratic reform organisations may be able to generate broad-based participation. In these cases, as we saw in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was a growing and popular claim to human rights and democracy that helped to define the groups vis-à-vis a common enemy. Moreover, the goals and benefits—an end to state repression—were more identifiable and immediate. Under a semi-democratic régime, however, the conditions which scholars argue favour the construction of broad-based social mobilisation may be more difficult to recapture. In these cases, often the issues have shifted to more detailed and technical public goods such as penal-code reform, budget transparency, and civil–military relations. The goals and benefits of a particular reform are also often more diffuse and seemingly less immediate. Given these weak incentives for mass-based mobilisation, advocacy for such broad public or collective goods such as judicial reform or budget transparency in a semi-democratic system is more likely to be pursued by individuals who understand these issues and are already organised and plugged into the political system.

Nevertheless, the results of the survey do bring into question the rather blanket claims often made by donors of the capacity of CSOs to act as channels for empowering the poor and disenfranchised. The expectation that CSOs that work on these issues would *a priori* serve as a channel for mass mobilisation may in itself be an unrealistic one on the part of donors and observers. Unfortunately, donors rarely take into consideration the class biases and characteristics of groups that receive support. Recent studies of civil society by the World Bank and USAID have avoided direct consideration of the actual class composition of the groups and their membership, and instead relied on the assumption that their very existence

and activity represents, in general, the broader participation of the society in the country's political life. This assumption, however, may say more about donors' facile notions of participation than it does about the effectiveness of these groups. Clearly the groups studied here are not the engines of mass participation, but perhaps that function should in any case be left to parties.

Sources of funding

This section discusses the sources of funding for CSOs in developing countries and the advantages and disadvantages of dependency on international donors. The responses of the NED-funded groups indicated that most depended on international support for their activities. The 16 groups relied on international donors for an average of 80 per cent of their capital, with the extent of this support ranging from 40 to 100 per cent of their operating budget.

The sources of international funding were varied, however. On average the groups received funding from seven different sources with none being dependent on the NED or any other single donor for their work or existence. The number of different funders varied from three (in the case of three groups) to eighteen (in the case of one group); and NED funds represented an average of 25 per cent of the total.

Interestingly, the three groups that were based outside the capital cities of their respective countries were those that enjoyed the greatest number of funding sources, domestic and international (twelve, nine, and five different international funders). In those three cases, the NED represented, on average, 11 per cent of their funding, and these groups were the best capitalised among its grantees. One casual observation is that despite the belief that 'going local' may help donors find new groups, at least in the case of the NED, one donor organisation simply appears to have tapped another set of usual suspects in the civil society community, but at the local level. Working with groups outside the capital does not mean necessarily gaining access to virgin civil society groups untouched by international donors.

The search for, and dependence on, international funding stems in large part from the lack of opportunities for these groups to raise funds domestically and the politically charged environments in which they work that drive their need to seek outside support. Despite their dependence on outside donors, many of the groups saw their international funding as an advantage. When asked about the benefits of receiving such support for their work, the groups overwhelmingly answered that foreign funding allowed them to work on issues not on the domestic agenda and to gain a certain degree of autonomy from competing domestic political pressures. Without the international initiative for areas such as human rights, judicial reform, and civil-military relations, many of these groups claimed that they would not be able to carry out projects that are unarguably important for the development of democracy. As a majority of them reported, there is very little interest and money domestically for these sorts of activities. A meagre middle class with disposable income to give to non-profit organisations, and the lack of a philanthropic culture in many of these countries, means that there are few opportunities for generating funds locally. Moreover, the sources of funding for similar activities in developed countries—business and the business class—are often reluctant to take on such initiatives and support groups that are pursuing these issues for fear of antagonising state officials on whom many of them depend for access and economic benefits. Put simply, the state's continued economic power, even after the reforms of the last decade, forces many possible benefactors to pursue a more self-interested strategy of maintaining good relations with public authorities. One might argue, however, that foreign funding gives these CSOs too much autonomy from their political and party systems. I return to this point below.

Even in the USA, the formation and operation of non-profit citizens' groups depends largely on the financial assistance of an outside patron. As Walker demonstrated in his study of interest groups in the USA, contributions from individuals, foundations, government, and associations accounted for 42.9 per cent of the budget for US citizens' groups. Less than half of their financial support (47.4 per cent) came from internally generated sources: dues, publications, and conferences (Walker 1983:400). Drawing on data collected from 90 citizens' groups in the USA, he concludes that '[w]ealthy individuals and private foundations often take the lead in promoting groups designed to mobilise large segments of the public in support of controversial causes' (Walker 1983:404). Without this external support the US interest-group sector would shrink considerably and 'would include very few groups seeking to obtain broad collective or public goods' (Walker 1983:404). Is it realistic, therefore, to expect similar groups in developing countries not to rely on international assistance for their work when domestic sources of patronage are weak or non-existent?

International funding is not without its drawbacks, however, as expressed by all of the groups surveyed. Five of them said that international funding can be a weakness when the objectives of international donors do not match with the recipient organisation's goals or the country context. Nevertheless, only one group said that there was an area in which it wanted to work but could not because of a lack of international funding. The political and institutional costs of international funding were what most troubled the groups studied. Five stated that being associated with international agencies can bring domestic political costs. Governments and opposition groups will often use the fact that they receive outside support as a political weapon to discredit them. Not surprisingly, given the prevailing situation when the survey was taken (early 2000), this response was most common from Peruvian groups. At that time, during a hotly contested and disputed electoral process, many CSOs had taken a very public position against the Fujimori régime.

A majority also cited the difficulties that international funding brings to their institutions, among them the unpredictability of funding (though several also implied that, though not perfect, it is still more predictable than domestic funding), the lack of flexibility, and the preference of international donors for supporting projects rather than administrative (core) costs. At an institutional level, international funding may limit a group's flexibility. But the organisational distortions that arise from dependence on international funding do not necessarily make them any less developed as institutions. Increasingly, donors like the NED and the Ford Foundation are supporting institutional and administrative costs and providing technical assistance precisely so that groups can develop organisationally (Dassin 1999). This should be seen as a positive trend. While it may not completely insulate a group from the whims of donors, it does allow it to devote greater attention to developing internal procedures and structures. Recent experience and a growing body of literature on NGOs in developing democracies indicate the need to support such organisations as institutions.

Political parties

The autonomy from domestic politics that the groups enjoyed as a result of international funding reappears in their relative autonomy from the party system in their respective countries. Their responses indicate a clear pattern of careful organisational independence from, and even disdain for, political parties. All of the groups said that their leaders did not participate in political parties, and the majority (nine) said that they had no sympathy for any one party. Even those that did claim party sympathies tended to frame this in terms of specific issues or themes (e.g. human rights, 'integral democracy') and not of a specific organisation or identity.

This distance was also evident when the groups were asked how they actually related to parties in their work. While a majority (12) claimed that they maintained relationships with political parties, it is noteworthy that this relationship revolved around specific themes and working with a wide variety of parties rather than an individual party. Twelve of the groups defined their relationship with parties as either one of educating them on precise themes (human rights, judicial reform, etc.) and/or promoting what five of them referred to as a new relationship between citizens and leaders. When they were asked how their organisations viewed their role vis-à-vis parties, the respondents provided answers like: '[as] an alternative source for the proposal of ways to resolve social problems'; 'to create space for participation where citizens that are disengaged from parties can participate'; and 'to establish new forms of relationships between state/politics and citizenship'. In terms of how this translated into programmes with political parties, the majority (ten) said that they engaged party leaders across the board in public discussions through various means about specific issues. In most cases this was by inviting candidates or party leaders to forums, conferences, and roundtables. Only one group claimed that it worked directly with party organisations, and four said that they preferred to work with institutions or public officials rather than through political parties. In sum, CSOs demonstrated an overwhelming lack of connection with political parties as organisations, instead developing contacts with individual leaders. In four cases, groups preferred to by-pass parties to lobby state institutions directly.

Similarly, the organisations demonstrated a notable lack of partisanship in terms of the parties they worked with or in which they participated. Nine claimed to work with all parties and five claimed to work primarily with the opposition but with no one party in particular. (The other two said they worked with no parties.) Their activities in this regard consisted of developing contacts with individual candidates or elected leaders and not with the parties as institutions. These patterns were not limited to countries where parties are in crisis (Venezuela and Peru) but held true across the nations.

While a causal relationship may not exist between international support and the institutional distance these groups have from their local parties, one cannot help but note the similarities between the rhetoric of international donors and the actions of their beneficiaries. Donors, including the NED, have for years funded CSOs on the assumption and implicit understanding that these remain non-partisan. The findings would indicate that donors appear to have been successful in this aim. But while perhaps not a direct result, the groups that received funding are generally disengaged from parties. This occurs at a time when parties are becoming increasingly discredited in Latin America. It is worth considering that perhaps donors have been complicit in strengthening and encouraging this civic disengagement from political parties. Such complicity may stem from two sources: providing support for groups that by their own admission grants them autonomy from local politics and also creating a funding environment in which groups are required (or believed) to remain outside party politics. At the same time, international support for political party development has been paltry compared with the levels of support for civil society. In 1999, excluding Haiti, USAID and the NED together spent approximately US\$1 million in party development programmes in Latin America—a fraction of the support that went to civil society at that time.

Donors' emphasis on civil society grew in large part out of a collective consensus that political parties had failed, and that civil society could begin to provide new means for reinvigorating the political system. The problem is that civil society came to be embraced as a political magic bullet. Rather than attempting to understand holistically how civil society relates to political parties, donors operated on the implicit or explicit assumption

either that parties would be rejuvenated as a result of a strong, vibrant civil society or that they were obsolete. Instead, for the short term at least, it appears that internationally supported CSOs have become somewhat unstuck from the party systems in their countries.

Is this such a bad thing? While it is true that the Latin American political parties of the past were hardly worthy of admiration or replication, stable democratic systems require a stable party system. In Latin America, CSOs are increasingly filling the gaps left by political parties, but civil society cannot replace a party system and in fact increases the need for strong political parties. As one observer of US interest groups wrote:

[Political parties] are the natural counterweight to interest groups, offering citizens the basic means of pursuing the nation's collective will. Only political parties can offer citizens broad choices about the major directions of public policy. (Berry 1984:220)

One cannot but look with some distress at the fragmentation of political debate and the political process that is occurring in places like Peru, Venezuela, and even Colombia. While civil society in these cases is not directly to blame, it does indicate the importance of having an effective party system that can aggregate demands and present clear options to the electorate and to policy makers. In the absence of strong political parties and the presence of strong civil society groups, the political system risks becoming embroiled in a cacophony of interests that not only hampers governance but also creates a vacuum in which Plebiscitarian leadership can emerge.

As mentioned above, many of the CSOs that are the recipients of donor largesse are not mass based but élite organisations. While this does not render them illegitimate it does point to their inherent weakness in providing a channel for broad-based participation. Despite the assumptions and optimism of donors, the process of broad political inclusion is the function of effective political parties. Virtually by definition, CSOs work on single issues for a limited constituency. Ultimately, it is parties that build broader collective identities, mobilise citizens around the broader themes of politics, balance competing interests, and provide a political/electoral counterweight to the concentration of power by single leaders. These functions are not achieved through a natural process whereby the state simply totals the individualistic demands of different sectoral organisations.

Conclusion

The results of the survey present us with a mixed bag. In contradiction to many of the charges levelled against donor-funded civil society groups, the majority of the groups in this study were neither solely creatures of the international community nor organisations that cynically shifted their strategies with the shifting interests of donors. Many emerged around concrete issues related to democracy and have enjoyed a significant lifespan, demonstrating an impressive ability to adapt not only to international donors but also to local conditions. Nor were these groups mere shells created to receive outside money. All had fairly stable, democratic decision-making structures and most had developed routinised means to select new leaders. Leadership turnover in most groups was fairly common, demonstrating that they were not dependent on one founding leader.

All of the groups surveyed were élite groups and had very limited membership. They are not mass-based organisations, equivalent to *campesino* or union organisations. Nevertheless, almost all had made an effort to reach out beyond the capital cities. And while international sources of financing figured as a large share of their budgets, many had diversified their sources and developed at least a limited capacity to raise funds locally.

Many of these conclusions are not inconsistent with what we would find from US groups engaged in similar activities. Mass-based political participation is considerably more difficult around issues of a highly technical nature where the benefits are diffuse. In these situations, we could expect that the pursuit of these public goods would be undertaken by a narrow segment of society and often with external sources of financial support. Rather than bringing into question the credibility or authenticity of these groups as CSOs, these findings should provoke a deeper understanding by donors of the realities and limitations of the kind of civil society they seek to promote and support. The crucial difference between the groups studied here and their counterparts in the USA would appear to be the source of their funding, specifically from domestic benefactors or international donors. The central question that arises is whether international financing serves as a disincentive for a group to engage in the country's broader party system. While US citizens' groups form around, and survive through, external funding, the fact that it comes from domestic sources, with their own partisan agendas and interests, may serve to embed the group in the larger political and partisan context. In contrast, international funding may have the opposite effect, serving to generate greater autonomy from local politics.

The results concerning civil society and political parties point to the need to re-evaluate our assumptions about civil society and its role in party systems, and the overwhelming attention placed on civil society in developing democracies. While foreign assistance has been instrumental in allowing groups to gain a certain degree of autonomy from domestic political and economic limitations, the recipients of foreign funding have remained disengaged from political party organisations and partisan identities. This is not to say that a direct relationship exists between foreign assistance and partisan de-alignment. Nor is it to say that these groups may not, as has occurred in other situations, eventually convert themselves into parties in the future. In fact, there has been a growing movement among some CSOs to seek out a more political and partisan role. Nevertheless, these conclusions would indicate that as political parties and party systems assume greater importance to democratic stability in Latin America, donors may need to examine more fully the political and partisan context in the countries where they work and the ways in which civil society and parties interact.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Michael Shifter, Jerry Hyman, Gwendolyn Bevis, and the anonymous reviewer, all of whom provided constructive comments on earlier drafts. The opinions expressed in the article are the author's own and do not reflect those of the National Endowment for Democracy.

Notes

- 1 In order to elicit the most candid answers, the respondents were guaranteed that their answers would not affect funding decisions. Arguably, there was a certain degree of self-censorship that should be taken into account. Nevertheless, even within those limits, their answers provide an interesting window into the publicly stated goals and operation of donors' support for CSOs and NGOs.
- 2 The other group said that membership was limited to staff who had worked in the organisation for over two years but did not provide numbers; presumably it would have been low, however.

References

- Bebbington, Anthony and G. Thiele** (1993) *NGOs and the State in Latin America: Rethinking Roles in Sustainable Agricultural Development*, London: Routledge.
- Berry, J.** (1984) *The Interest Group Society*, Boston, MA: Little, Brown.
- Carothers, Thomas** (1999) *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Dassin, Joan** (1999) 'Building the Latin American Human Rights Field: Increasing Institutional and Financial Sustainability for Latin American Human Rights Organizations', unpublished report, New York: Ford Foundation.
- Diamond, Larry** (1994) 'Rethinking civil society: toward democratic consolidation', *Journal of Democracy* 5(3):4–17.
- Edwards, Michael and David Hulme** (1996a) 'Too close for comfort? The impact of official aid on nongovernmental organisations', *World Development* 24(6):961–973.
- Edwards, Michael and David Hulme** (1996b) *Beyond the Magic Bullet: NGO Performance and Accountability in the Post-Cold War World*, Westford, CT: Kumarian Press.
- Isaacs, Anita** (1999) 'International assistance for democracy: a cautionary tale', in J. Dominguez (ed.) *The Future of Inter-American Relations*, New York: Routledge.
- Macdonald, Laura** (1997) *Supporting Civil Society: The Political Role of Non-governmental Organizations in Central America*, New York: St. Martin's Press.
- McAdam, Doug, S. Tarrow and C. Tilly** (1997) 'Toward an integrated perspective on social movements and revolution', in M. I. Lichbach and A. S. Zuckerman (eds.) *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure*, Cambridge: CUP.
- Schattsneider, E. E.** (1975) *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*, New York: Rinehart and Winston.
- Van Rooy, Alison (ed.)** (1999) *Civil Society and the Aid Industry*, London: Earthscan.
- Walker, Jack** (1983) 'The origins and maintenance of interest groups in America', *The American Political Science Review* 77(2):390–406.
- Wellard, Kenneth and J. Copestake** (1993) *NGOs and the State in Africa: Rethinking Roles in Sustainable Agricultural Development*, London: Routledge.
- White, Gordon** (1994) 'Civil society, democratisation and development (i): clearing the analytical ground', *Democratisation* 1(3):375–390.

The author

Christopher A. Sabatini is Senior Program Officer for Latin America and the Caribbean at the National Endowment for Democracy. Contact details: National Endowment for Democracy, 1101 Fifteenth Street, NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20005–5000, USA. <chriss@ned.org>.