Strengthening Partnerships Between Government & Civil Society

Five Practical Ways Forward

Shared with NITI Aayog

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Five Practical Ways Forward

This note suggests practical ways in which the consultation held on the above topic by Niti Aayog on March 1, 2017 can be taken forward.

Civil society is a vast and complex field of activity. The term confuses more than it clarifies. National Policy on Voluntary Organisations in 2007 acknowledged this diversity, but chose to work with those who are involved in socio-economic development (as referred to in the 11th Five Year Plan). This focus then helps to clarify distinctive contributions of such organisations.

1. **What is the USP of civil society?**

Voluntary development organisations share with the government vision of ‘sabka saath, sabka vikas’. With this shared agenda, it is important to clarify what do partners bring to the partnership which is unique. In respect of such organisations, Planning Commission dialogue in 2002 chaired by then Prime Minister Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee agreed three distinctive contributions of such development organisations:

- Making weaker sections aware of their rights and entitlements in different programmes of the government---generating demand
- Acting as a facilitative bridge between delivery machinery/officials and such excluded communities---last mile connectivity
- Providing regular field-based feedback to district, state and national departments & ministries

2. **What are the instruments of such partnership?**

National Policy on Voluntary Organisations (2007) identified several practical instruments. At this juncture, there are no clear instruments of cooperation other than certain ‘funding’ schemes for performing small, occasional functions in a location for a given scheme. The criteria for selection are vague, and data-base about ‘providers’ confusing.

Each of the above three contributions of voluntary organisations requires different arrangements for partnership.

- Awareness generation & demand creation efforts should be seen as necessary for promoting participation of weaker sections. Location and focal community specific, typically at district or city level, collaboration is most useful in this regard.
- Facilitative bridge function needs to be programme focused, and state level collaboration may be most appropriate.
- For independent and regular feedback mechanism to work effectively, Niti Aayog should take initiative in developing such partnership.
3. **What does government bring to the partnership?**

No meaningful partnership works until government also clarifies what it brings to the partnership. The most crucial contribution of government is regular, authentic and updated information about policies, programmes, schemes, status of implementation, etc. There should be no need to use RTI to get such information.

With modern digital technology, it should be possible for government to do so, especially in respect of those policies and programmes where it is partnering with voluntary organisations.

4. **Should government fund such partnerships?**

Voluntary organisations do need reliable funds to continue to perform their functions effectively. However, certain types of funding arrangements can be most productive in this partnership.

For awareness generation and demand mobilisation function, government must provide funds with clear and transparent criteria. Current procedure of tendering does not work to attract those with integrity & professionalism.

For facilitative bridge function, government should create a jointly managed public fund for each major development programme. Medium term (3 years, say) contracting can be undertaken through this fund.

For independent feedback, government should not fund, but enable such organisations to be funded by private sources. Niti Aayog can create frameworks for this, and government can acknowledge the contributions of such donors publicly.

5. **How can the eco-system for partnership be improved?**

Authentic understanding of voluntary organisations in the country is very inadequate. Multitudes of out-dated laws and procedures have confounded the field. Niti Aayog must apply itself to the task of modernising and digitalising regulations and data-base about the non-profit sector which is huge outside the government and for-profit domains.

More importantly, public trust in the value of such partnerships needs to be articulated. Political and official leaderships of national and state governments must publicly invite and acknowledge the value of such partnership.

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1. *It is hoped that this fresh initiative by Niti Aayog will not remain a mere ‘record of discussion’, but NATIONAL POLICY ON THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR, 2007*
3. PROCEEDINGS: ALL INDIA CONFERENCE ON THE ROLE OF THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi, 2002