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Civil Society Collaboration with Business: Bringing Empowerment Back in

DARCY ASHMAN *
Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Summary. — Strategic partnerships between civil society organizations (CSOs) and businesses are widely promoted as important new strategies to encourage corporate citizenship in the global South. This study tested these claims by examining 10 cases of collaboration between CSOs and businesses in Brazil, India, and South Africa. Findings suggest a sobering view of the benefits that civil society organizations and their constituencies can expect from collaboration. Development impacts may be more likely in sectors clearly linked to business interests, such as education and employment generation. Goals of organizational capacity building are more likely to be satisfied than those of citizen empowerment. CSOs and businesses reap mutual benefits from collaboration, but CSOs tend to shoulder more of the costs. Businesses can dominate collaborative decision-making, with negative results for sustainability. The paper offers a number of propositions to guide further research and inform collaborative practice. Empowered civil society collaboration with business is suggested as a more appropriate model than strategic partnership for CSOs pursuing sustainable development. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Key words — intersectoral collaboration, civil society, global, Brazil, India, South Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

Global leaders in the development field are promoting collaboration between civil society and the market as a significant new strategy for promoting sustainable development. Major actors such as The World Bank, the United Nations Development Program, CIVICUS, and several bilateral donors are convening international forums, supporting innovative projects, and advocating strategies for collaboration between the sectors. After a decade or more of neoliberal policy governance in most countries around the world, several trends have converged to prompt attention within civil society to the idea of collaboration with business.

Development-oriented civil society organizations (CSOs) are facing increasing uncertainty and reductions in financial resource flows from international donors and national governments. Simultaneously, demands for services are growing as large numbers of people suffer from decreased government services and economic dislocations that are associated with global financial shifts. In the context of declining legitimacy of government to provide basic services, pressures on private actors in civil society and the market to address social demands are increasing.

The ideas that increased levels of civil society–business cooperation will bring significant sustainable development benefits and substitute for the role of the state need further exploration. If collaboration with business is warranted as a major new strategy, it should produce significant impacts and be widely replicable

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across the global South. This paper assesses the empirical data from 10 cases of civil society–business partnerships in Brazil, South Africa, and India. It identifies the benefits of civil society–business collaboration and examines factors associated with the relatively more successful cases. The analysis suggests a more sobering and perhaps surprising view of intersectoral collaboration than many advocates working within the neoliberal paradigm expect. Corporate citizenship may not produce significant development results unless CSOs are strong partners in collaborative activities, and governments may play very important roles in producing successful collaboration between the other two sectors.

2. STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

One of the most widely promoted approaches to civil society–business collaboration is that of strategic partnerships (Pinney, 1999; Twose & Blakely, 1999; Waddell, 1997). In most definitions, a partnership is strategic when it involves the core business or program activities of both partners. Strategic partnerships are thought to differ from past forms of relationships between the sectors in very important ways. They are neither philanthropic relationships in which businesses simply donate funds to CSOs, nor adversarial relationships based on CSO protest of corporate behavior. In businesses, strategic partnerships with CSOs include internal functions beyond community relations, such as production, marketing, and recruitment. Civil society organizations look to strategic business partners to create programs jointly in which business capacities are critical to solving development problems. Strategic partnerships are "win–win" relationships based on mutual gain to the partners in areas of their strategic interests (Waddell, 2000).

Proponents argue that strategic partnerships create greater benefits for the partners and society than philanthropic relationships. Because they are more central to the partners' core businesses and programs, partners are thought to be more likely to invest significant resources in them. Partnerships between businesses and civil society organizations combine the complementary strengths associated with their sectoral identities, e.g., the productive capacity of business and the social organizing capacity of civil society (Pinney, 1999; Twose & Blakely, 1999; Waddell & Brown, 1997). Intersectoral partnerships are proposed as particularly well-suited to addressing large, complex social problems that cannot be solved by single sectors and organizations acting alone (Waddell & Brown, 1997). Some proponents are so convinced of the value of strategic partnerships that they urge CSOs to stop criticizing corporate behavior and start collaborating with businesses; others encourage CSOs to learn business language and adopt business-like management principles (Buzzard, 1999; Waddell, 1997).

Strategic partnerships are considered to contain inherent incentives that motivate prospective partners to collaborate (Pinney, 1999; Waddell, 1997). Since many CSOs and businesses are separated by sectoral, social, or political differences, the literature emphasizes the importance of intermediary actors in linking prospective partners. Intermediary actors are organizations and individuals with ties to both sectors (Pinney, 1999, p. 113; Waddell, 2000). Civil society organizations and businesses may realize that they can benefit from collaboration across sectors yet fail to know any potential partners, so actors with linkages to both sectors are necessary to facilitate collaborative ventures. Advocates of strategic partnerships have given less attention to precipitating factors in the social, economic, and political environment of the actors than other researchers of collaboration (see for example Ashman, 1999; Saxton, 1997; Gray, 1989; Astley & Fombrun, 1983; Trist, 1983).

Interorganizational relationships and coordination mechanisms that ensure mutual influence and shared control are a major factor in the success of most kinds of interorganizational collaboration (Ashman, 1999; Brown, 1998; Brown & Ashman, 1996; Alter & Hage, 1993). Partners may not be equal in size, resources, or expertise, but results appear to be more significant when decision-making about the direction and management of joint activities is shared (Saxton, 1997). Since businesses tend to have more financial resources, they are usually seen as the more powerful partner in most civil society–business relationships. More study of the ways in which interorganizational arrangements balance power differences between civil society and business organizations is needed before endorsing the idea of collaboration as a means to development.

The arguments for strategic partnerships between civil society organizations and businesses can be summarized in the following four