

## **Why Partnership with Civil Society is Important- a Belize Perspective**

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The activism of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society organizations (CSOs) is a relatively new phenomenon in Belize. It took off in the decade following Belize's independence in 1981, which saw a growing demand at all levels of society for more effective democracy, better governance, and greater equity in the development process. Successive governments in Belize have recognized the critical role of these organizations in the social and economic development of the country.

There were suspicions initially that NGOs were not adequately rooted in their communities, that they were ad hoc and unreliable. Parallel to the reducing role of the state and following what appeared to some as adversarial roles, agents of development in Belize were stimulated to dialogue and look at problems in different ways. This dialogue sustained over a number of years revealed to government that communities are genuinely concerned and have a strong desire to participate in addressing social concerns.

The relationship between government and civil society in Belize has emerged from one of distrust to a sense of partnership and collaboration. This partnership grew from a realization that government does not hold a monopoly in the delivery of public services and in securing development goals. That government alone cannot adequately address all issues affecting people's lives had to be recognized. It also had to be accepted that for democracy to work actors in society, including government, have to exercise tolerance and must be committed to a certain consensual approach to governance.

In Belize NGOs recognized that if they were to speak on issues of national concern and to participate in the decision making process then they too must accept some level of regulation, in particular with regard to their own corporate governance, legitimacy, and sustainability. They therefore took the initiative to draft legislation regulating their recognition and registration under the laws of Belize. The Non-Governmental Organizations Act of 2001 establishes that the aims, nature, and objects of non-governmental organizations must be consistent with the principles enshrined in the preamble to the Belize constitution and human rights treaties and instruments to which Belize is a party. They must also be designed to contribute to sustainable human development in Belize. In order to provide for the autonomy of civil society the Act also establishes that NGOs shall be independent of Government control of their operations.

By recognizing their goodwill and commitment to work in the development process, Government realized the rich potential of productive collaboration with CSOs. Sustainable development requires a holistic approach. It can only be achieved if the stakeholders in society are factored in the decision-making process. Development is not about government; it is about people. It goes without saying that policy is more effective and sustainable when communities are allowed to participate throughout the process, from formulation to implementation. This ensures a sense of ownership that would not be there if solutions to their problems are imposed from above or from outside. Sustainable development requires people to work together. It involves having the opportunity and the power to shape how one's own community progresses.

Non-governmental organizations and CSOs are crucial as intermediary groups between government and the people. In Belize they play an important role in the formulation of, definition and implementation of development programmes. CSOs are, therefore, not there to tow any party political line on issues and they are

expected to remain non-partisan. Indeed, at times they have been known to be critical of both government and opposition. This is essential to the democratic process and it ensures that the main political parties alone do not hold a monopoly of views and ideas on issues of public concern. In a number of areas NGOs have been a step ahead of political parties in Belize. The most important example is the successful campaign for constitutional reform, which they launched in the 1990s.

As part of a commitment to political reform and good governance, the amendment to the Belize Constitution of January 2002, included, *inter alia*, a reform and expansion of the Senate to enable key interest groups to have a formal voice at the state level. The addition of three senate seats now allows for civil society and trade unions, business interests, and the religious communities to each have a representative in the Senate.

If our democracy is to remain vibrant and progress is to be achieved, Government has a duty to be responsive to the concerns of people. We cannot afford any disaffection and frustration of our citizenry to lead to a repudiation of the values and norms of our society. Any decline in people's commitment to public order and rule of law is a threat to our democracy. By encouraging public participation we ensure that people's energies are directed at constructive participation and public dialogue. Tolerance, dialogue and collaboration among the various agents of development are a *sine qua non* for good governance.

The challenge is to ensure that people have a level of understanding and know-how to enable them to effectively participate in Belizean life. As a society we place great emphasis on the need to educate our citizenry; the largest share in the government budget is dedicated to education. The more knowledgeable our people are about the issues confronting us, the more likely it is that they will become involved and participate in dealing with those issues that matter to them. In this regard, civic and political education also serves to enhance the role of civil society. At the heart of it all is a desire and a commitment to better governance – one that is based on the full participation of citizens.

We also recognize that governance is not just about legislating. It also has to do with developing a culture that values integrity, accountability, transparency and a sense of equity in the delivery of public services. Civil society has an essential role to play in this respect, in monitoring the holders of public office and in contributing to the oversight for integrity in public life.

Government cannot do it alone. Sustainable development requires the honing of efforts, resources, and expertise of all agents of development. Maximizing citizen participation is key. In Belize we have recognized that a strong civil society does not mean there is a weak government – it has more to do with having a strong, vibrant and inclusive democracy that places full faith in its people and is confident of its national development goals.