Strengthening Social Policy:
Lessons on forging government – civil society policy partnerships

A SUMMARY REPORT

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A Project of the Institute On Governance funded by the Canadian International Development Agency
The Institute On Governance (IOG) is a Canadian, non-profit think tank founded in 1990 to promote responsive and responsible governance both in Canada and abroad. We define governance as the process whereby power is exercised, decisions are made, citizens or stakeholders are given voice, and account is rendered on important issues.

We explore what good governance means in different contexts. We undertake policy-relevant research, and publish the results in policy briefs and research papers.

We help public organizations of all kinds, including governments, public agencies and corporations, the voluntary sector, and communities to improve their governance.

We bring people together in a variety of settings, events and professional development activities to promote learning and dialogue on governance issues.

The IOG’s current interests include work related to Aboriginal governance; technology and governance; board governance; values, ethics and risk; building policy capacity; democratic reform and citizen engagement; voluntary sector governance; health and governance; accountability and performance measurement; and environmental governance.

You will find additional information on the Institute and our current activities on our web site, at www.iog.ca.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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- Dr. Juree Vichit-Vadakan and Dr. Kanokkan Anukansai (Thailand)
- Mr. Mel Gill (Canada).

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- Dato’ G. Palanivellu, Deputy Minister (Ministry of Women, Family & Community Development, Malaysia)
- Dato’ S. Veerasingam, Deputy Minister (Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs, Malaysia)
- Professor Abdullah Malim Baginda (National Council of Welfare and Social Development, Malaysia)
- Mr. Bishan Singh (Malaysian Institute of Social Change, Malaysia) and,
- Ms. Susan Carter (Voluntary Sector, Canada).

Finally, we wish to thank the dozens of civil society and government actors who participated in the project, came to the Regional Meeting and took home lessons for dissemination and discussion throughout their own communities.
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A Summary Report

I. INTRODUCTION

Background
As more centrally controlled, authoritarian approaches to governance in many parts of the world prove to be ineffective at meeting many modern governance and development challenges, civil society organizations are increasingly playing a role in the process of governance. Across the globe, particularly in the developing world, partnerships have been used to strengthen the legitimacy of public policymaking through a greater involvement by the agents of development in the definition and implementation of policies that concern them. Civil society, and civil society in partnership with business and government, is increasingly seen as the most appropriate actor to deal with a range of problems, particularly those related to social exclusion, which are outside the reach of state bureaucracy and beyond the interests of the private sector.\(^1\) The logic of this approach is that social problems have multiple causes and require the collaborative effort of multiple agents.

The nature of the relationship between civil society organizations and the government on policy issues is a matter of pressing concern throughout much of the world, including Southeast Asia. The argument that sustainable, equitable growth and development should be accompanied not only by democratic decision making but also by more effective state-society partnerships is beginning to take hold in Southeast Asia. Yet governments have much to learn about how to organize civil society, how to build a civil dialogue and broaden the policy-making process and how to build constructive policy partnerships between the government and civil society organizations. Civil society organizations, for their part, are also increasingly recognizing the role they need to play in the policy process and the importance of building more effective relationships with government to create and implement social policy.

In Canada there is also increasing recognition of the importance of the government-civil society relationship and the challenges inherent in such a relationship. The Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI), an undertaking between the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector, is aimed at improving the relationship between government and the sector and strengthening the sector's capacity. During this five-year initiative, the federal government and the voluntary sector are working together to address issues including funding practices, policy dialogue, volunteerism, and research about the sector.

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\(^1\) John Morison (2000), ‘Social partnership – is it “the only game in town”?’ *Community Development Journal* 37 (1) January, p. 105.
Objectives of the Paper

This paper attempts to summarize briefly the results of research undertaken by the Institute On Governance and a network of local researchers in Canada, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. The research focussed on building more effective government-civil society social policy partnerships. This paper has four objectives:

1. To provide an overview of the research project;
2. To explore the term ‘partnership’ and outline the changing governance context;
3. To briefly summarize the case studies undertaken in each of the five participating countries;
4. To examine and build upon some of the common lessons that were drawn from the case studies and discussed at the project’s Regional Meeting in Kuala Lumpur (KL) in June 2004.

Organization of the Paper

This summary paper is organized into five parts: Part I provides an introduction; Part II outlines the scope of the larger project; Part III explores the term partnership and outlines the changing governance context for policy-making; Part IV summarizes the case studies; Part V focuses on the common lessons learned; and Part VI draws some final conclusions.

II. PROJECT SUMMARY: BUILDING EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT-CIVIL SOCIETY SOCIAL POLICY PARTNERSHIPS

As part of Canada’s Voluntary Sector Initiative, the Government of Canada funded research to explore how government could more effectively engage the voluntary sector in the policy process. One of these research projects, funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and undertaken by the Institute On Governance, focused on building more effective government – civil society social policy partnerships. The overall goal of the project was to assist government and civil society in Canada and four countries in Southeast Asia to develop more effective government-civil society policy partnerships, with a specific focus on policy related to the social agenda. The participating countries were Canada, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Objectives: Specifically, the objectives of the project were to:

- Build a network linking civil society organizations (CSOs) focused on the social agenda to key policy officials responsible for social agenda issues in government in Canada and four countries in southeast Asia;
- Learn, from the experience of the five countries represented in the network, how to strengthen capacity of civil society organizations (CSOs) to impact upon government policy decisions and how to build more effective state-society policy partnerships on matters related to the social agenda;
- Use the knowledge gained to inform both government and civil society organizations in Southeast Asia and Canada about building capacity of civil society organizations and building more effective policy partnerships on social agenda issues.
Methodology: Researchers in each of the five participating countries were asked to develop case studies that traced the history and the dynamics of the relationship between government and civil society, drawing out how conflicts were dealt with, how trust was built, and how the involvement of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) impacted on policy. The overall objective was to draw out lessons learned from what worked and what did not work well.

The topics chosen for the case studies reflected the wide range of social policy challenges facing the region and the world: prostitution, trafficking in women, maternity leave, children’s rights, indigenous people’s rights, and consumer issues. All of the researchers chose to apply a number of different methodologies in their studies, including focus groups, roundtable discussions, individual interviews, and literature surveys, and all were able to secure at least some involvement of government representatives in their focus groups or individual interviews.

Upon completion of the case studies, a regional meeting was held in Kuala Lumpur on June 16 and 17, 2004 to share the results and build upon the lessons learned. The meeting was also an opportunity to build networks among civil society and government representatives at the regional and international levels.

The Institute On Governance published the final results of this project, including the complete case studies and analysis, in late Fall 2004.

III. **Policy Partnerships in an Era of Cosmopolitan Governance**

A partnership may be defined simply as a collaborative venture between two or more organizations that pool resources in pursuit of common objectives. As in law – where the term generally implies a sharing of risks and rewards – a policy partnership aims to represent to all partners a better strategy to address a specific project or goal than each partner operating independently, “to add value to the efforts of individual partners”.

The increased focus on partnerships as a tool for governance fits into the wider process of movement from the unitary state as the main governance actor to the idea of “cosmopolitan” governance. According to Held, this change has involved the growth of a web of complex relationships at regional, national and global levels across political institutions, agencies, networks and associations in the economy and in civil society at each level. The concept of governance itself is no longer focussed on national governments and traditional models of public administration. It is becoming a more wide-ranging and flexible term that can connote various forms of administrative or regulatory capacity.

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Governance has become a “hot” topic as evidence mounts on the critical role it plays in determining societal well-being. 5 Research has shown that if we improve the processes and institutions we use to make important decisions, we will have better results. The Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, reflected this growing consensus when he recently stated that “good governance is perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development.” 6

Policy partnerships are a growing component of governance, which is the process whereby societies or organizations make their important decisions, determine who they involve in the process and how they render account. As John Graham of the IOG noted in a recent paper, the prevalence of partnerships and new institutional arrangements is raising questions about who should properly be involved in what: a classic example of a governance question. 7

Building more effective social policy partnerships, which is the overall purpose of this CIDA-funded project, is essentially about building good governance. Defining principles of good governance is both controversial and complex, with different variants propounded by different institutions and organizations. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP Governance and Sustainable Human Development 1997) put forward a set of principles that, with slight variations, appear in much of the literature. 8 These principles are about not only the results of power but also how well it is exercised.

According to this approach, good governance exists where those in positions of power are perceived to have acquired this power legitimately, and there is appropriate voice accorded to those whose interest are affected by decisions. 9 Further, the exercise of power results in a sense of overall direction that serves as a guide to action. Performance is a third criterion: governance should result in performance that is responsive to the interests of citizens or stakeholders. In addition, good governance acquires accountability between those in positions of power (agents) and those whose interests they are supposed to be serving (principals). Accountability cannot be effective unless there is transparency and openness in the conduct of the organization’s work. And governance should be fair, which implies conformity to the rule of law and principles of equity. 10

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6 Kofi Annan, www.unu/p&g/wgs/. Similar themes are found in the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), the UN Millennium Declaration and other declarations and plans as part of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD).


8 Ibid.


In many cases, effective and genuine policy partnerships help build good governance by enhancing participatory democracy and reducing exclusion and fragmentation by giving all actors a positive stake. Partnerships can also lead to more effective development by revealing the complex social dynamics that surround development, which promotes better planning, and implementation. Moreover, partnerships can specifically improve the cost effectiveness of social development by bringing on board civil society actors who “take ownership of interventions and are an added resource in their implementation.”

Indeed, the OECD and others have stressed that NGOs may be best suited for the tasks of fostering popular participation which include: articulating the needs of the weak (including the poor), working in remote areas, changing attitudes and practices of local officials, and nurturing the productive capacity of the most vulnerable groups such as the disabled and landless. For example, studies of decentralization and land reform programs in a range of countries have demonstrated that the active involvement of local organizations is a key factor influencing the degree of benefits reaching poorer citizens.

Yet partnerships are complex and varied and it is important to look at the players, power dynamics and politics surrounding a particular relationship. Terms like “participation” and “partnership” are seen as embodying positive norms and practices in much development literature, such as the potential to transcend social divide. They are nevertheless value-laden terms, each with a wide range of meanings that are often contested. As Harriss notes:

Parntership is a term which has come to be used very loosely, to refer to almost any kind of relationship between individuals and groups…[where] straightforward contracting relationships are quite often described as “partnerships”… or asymmetrical relationships between northern and southern NGOs, in which the language of partnership thinly veils direction based on power differences.

Use of the term “partnership” to describe the nature of a policy does not in and of itself necessarily indicate any actual change, since the term has often been used one way rhetorically and quite another in practice. In Britain, for example, the notion of partnership has been reworked numerous times during the 20th century, with its practical definition under Thatcher’s administration bearing little resemblance to New Labor’s 1998 compact with the voluntary sector.

The term partnership should not be taken to imply an equal distribution of power, resources, skills and responsibilities. In fact, partnerships may encompass a broad array of arrangements that range from informal associations or networks to formal legal agreements. As Frank and

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12 See the 1988 OECD report Voluntary Aid for Development: the Role of NGOs, the report from the 2002 roundtable on local experiences of rural development, organized by the Working Party on Territorial Policy in Rural Areas and the 2001 OECD Report Local Partnerships for Better Governance <www.oecd.org>
Smith noted, “partnerships are about power: individual and collective...strength, wisdom and ability. Power is always present and is rarely equal. A successful partnership values and openly acknowledges the different types of power that each individual or organization brings”.15

In practice, the nature of participation in partnerships is highly variable, depending on the nature of the state-civil society relationship. According to Clark (1995), where the government has a positive social agenda (or even where individual ministries do) and where NGOs are largely effective there is potential for a strong, collaborative relationship16. Clark is not referring here to the subcontracting of placid NGOs, but rather a genuine partnership to work on a problem based on mutual respect, and the acceptance of the autonomy, independence and pluralism of NGO opinions and positions.

Even when these conditions are met, enduring problems include mutual distrust, government fears of NGO erosion of their political power, and NGO mistrust of government motivation. As NGOs develop closer collaboration with governments and enter into partnerships, there can be potential risks of corruption, reduced independence and financial dependency. A series of scholars and organizations have written about both barriers to and elements of a “healthy” NGO-state relationship.17 Critical factors include issues of plurality (rights of association) and information (public access to information); government-imposed regulations and reporting requirements; transparency (particularly in funding); operational variables, such as the stage in the project cycle at which collaboration is sought as well as guidance and training provided for partnerships; and the capacity, particularly of local government and civil society.

The effectiveness of NGO-state collaboration depends on variables related to the particular sector, the attitude of relevant central and local officials and the attitude of civil society to collaboration. For example, partnership outcomes depend on how the governments provide funds, contract and training opportunities to NGOs, and how civil society builds its own capacity and deals with the challenges of representation (speaking with one voice when possible) and inclusivity (including a wide range of NGOs and CSOs). The training and upgrading of local actors (both local civil servants and NGOs) has an important role to play in helping partnership actors become conversant with technical, financial and administrative requirements.

IV. THE CASE STUDIES: PARTNERSHIP IN PRACTICE

The case studies trace the history and the dynamics of the relationship between government and civil society, drawing out lessons on how conflict was handled, how trust was built, how the involvement of the NGOs impacted on policy, what worked and what didn’t work.

**Indonesia**

In Indonesia, Joe Fernandez of the Institute for Policy and Community Development Studies

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(IPCOS) chose to focus on civil society engagement in the policy process at the local government level. Mr. Fernandez conducted research that resulted in two case studies, which share the same focus on women’s rights issues in a transitional democratic state. Both cases deal with the intersection of local government policies and the activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) committed to legal and social advocacy. However, each case highlights a different aspect of partnership in the social policy process.

The first deals with the political rights of women in the policy-making process in the urbanized community of Surakarta. Three models for civil engagement that have been used in Surakarta are reviewed: a bottom-up mechanism for policy formulation; a marginalized community involvement in planning policy; and a multi-stakeholder forum. Each of these approaches is analyzed in terms of structures, process and degree of success.

The second case deals with women’s rights violation practices across state borders. This issue, with a specific focus on trafficking in women, has only recently received attention from government and the broader public, because of different understandings of what the issue is and the severity of the problem. The case study explores the challenge of effectively defining the problem and the various efforts by civil society organizations to engage government in addressing the issue of trafficking in women.

The lessons learned highlighted in the Indonesian case studies include18:

- The need for civil society organizations (CSOs) to build intellectual and financial capacity, particularly in advocacy and lobbying. Despite an eagerness to establish various CSOs in the post-New Order regime in Indonesia, NGOs have largely been formed in the spirit of protest and are often donor-driven, with limited knowledge about the public policy process;
- Promote rules and cross-ethnic or group contract, rather than winner-take-all politics. Collaboration-building through cross-interest accord on common platforms is particularly important in Indonesia where local democracy is developing in a tension-filled climate where violence is likely;
- Avoid co-optation and ‘free-riding’ by institutionalizing linkages between decision makers and grassroots communities. Urban participatory policy structures can deteriorate into local government bureaucracies which are largely unresponsive to community needs and desires. An evaluation of Surakarta municipal initiatives in Indonesia, for instance, noted a widespread public perception that they were elitist, despite the fact that the processes appear to be inclusive and “bottom-up”.

**Thailand**

In Thailand, Dr. Juree of the Centre for Philanthropy and Civil Society, focussed on civil society involvement at the national level, particularly in the development of two pieces of legislation related to prostitution and maternity leave.

Dr. Juree and her team reviewed the history of policy and legislation related to prostitution in Thailand and civil society’s role in moving this policy agenda forward. Civil society

18 Drawn from the two case studies for this project by Joe Fernandez (2004), *Strengthening Policy Partnerships in Indonesia: Preventing Trafficking in Women and Voicing Women’s Political Interests.*
organizations in Thailand struggled to change civil society’s attitudes toward prostitution, and it took a fire at a brothel in Phuket in 1984 to begin to raise awareness of the extent of the prostitution problem. Over the next 12 years, civil society organizations formed a working group, found a champion in government, participated in joint committees and engaged in public debate until the Prevention and Suppression of Prostitution Act was passed in 1996. This legislation decriminalized prostitution and penalized not only prostitutes, but also their customers, brothels and parents (for underage prostitutes); actual implementation of the bill, however, has been very slow and inconsistent.

In the second case study, a successful maternity leave amendment for government officials led to increased awareness of the importance of maternity leave for all women workers. As a result, women worker groups, supported by other civil society organizations, academics, labour unions and others, began a movement to press for longer paid maternity leave for women workers. Public education campaigns raised support for the issue among the general public, and public demonstrations pressured the government to respond. In the end, the movement leaders and the Prime Minister agreed to a compromise measure, with recognition that there could be further discussions.

The lessons learned in the Thai case studies include:

• Despite some problems with implementation, it is clear from both Thai case studies that rules and regulations are vital ingredients in social change. Without such legal frameworks, cooperation and initiatives by various non-state actors and state personnel is not tolerated by the state. Since government officials cannot be seen as taking matters into their own hands, legal reform offers a strong basis for change and action;
• Champions from within government can serve as catalysts for change, such as the female Thai minister who advocated for change and forged alliances with both government and non-government players and solicited press coverage;
• Social policy change and partnerships can be furthered when the issue is translated into a matter that is perceived by many segments of society as being important. In the case of provisions for maternity leave, a supposedly “woman’s” problem in Thailand was eventually transformed to include issues which affect the future of society, such as babies’ nutrition and well-being and young children’s health and benefits.

Malaysia

In Malaysia, the case studies focused on national-level civil society involvement in policy-making and implementation. Dr. Jayasooria of the Yayasan Strategik Sosial (YSS) and his team of researchers concentrated on topics related to children’s rights, women’s rights and consumer rights.

The case study on the Domestic Violence Act was written by Ivy Josiah from the Women’s Aid Organisation (WAO). It explores the many years of work of a loose coalition of women’s groups that contributed to the passage of a law on domestic violence that classified domestic violence as criminal behaviour and ensured applicability to all Malaysians. Civil society

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19 Drawn from the case studies for this project prepared by Dr. Juree Vichit-Vadakan and Dr. Kanokkan Anukansai (2004), Civil Society and Governance in Thailand.
organizations employed a variety of methods, including lobbying, participation in joint committees, public education campaigns and media engagement.

The National Policy on Women case study was co-written by Shanthi Dairiam of the International Women’s Right Action Watch – Asia Pacific and Mrs. R. Gurusamy of the National Council of Women (NCWO). The National Policy On Women (NPW) is a statement of good intent, which articulates the needs and interest of women and stipulates that these concerns should be included in mainstream policy development and programs, with women participating as full and equal partners at local and national levels. The case study explores the challenges that women’s groups faced in achieving this policy, the methods they used to engage the government, and the difficulty of effective policy implementation.

The case study on Children was contributed by Sandiyao Sebastian from the Malaysian Child Resource Institute. This case study examines a number of efforts to address the needs of children in Malaysia. Some of the many initiatives include efforts to effectively engage children in the policy process, such as the “Say Yes for Children” campaign and the creation of The Child Act of 2001, a broad-based piece of legislation that protects the interests of children.

The last case study, which is on consumer rights, was written by Josie Fernandez of the Federation of Malaysian Consumers Association (FOMCA). Following the privatization of sewerage services and an unfair hike in charges to consumers, FOMCA led a campaign with a coalition of other civil society organizations. With the support of the media, the coalition sought to change the billing system through engagement with the government, particularly in the areas of policy development and consumer education. FOMCA’s success in this campaign was due to its long-standing relationship with government, strong organizational ability, extensive networks and effective use of the media. The case study explored these and other factors in an effort to draw out lessons for use in other government-civil society partnerships.

The lessons learned in the Malaysian case studies include:

- To effectively grow meaningful government-civil society partnerships, both sides need to clarify the engagement process and address issues such as the nature of the relationship, particularly when partners are not equal in terms of knowledge, resources and expertise. Other issues to consider are the possibilities of co-optation, window-dressing and manipulation as well as what approach the state and the NGOs should take to reach a consensus on how to progress;

- Like civil society, the Government has a responsibility to put principles of good governance into action, and to demonstrate its sincerity by placing emphasis on developing good relations with NGOs. One way to accomplish this is to ensure better representation of NGOs on various Government advisory committees, boards and agencies to help civil society give better feedback to the Government.

- Both partners need to promote policy implementation and work against “policy evaporation”. With key resources, the state is responsible for instituting a clear framework and operational guidelines, which make it easier for civil servants to work with NGOs on implementation. Civil society and NGOs need to have a better understanding of Government bureaucracy and

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20 Drawn from the case studies for this project prepared by Dr. Denison Jayasooria (2004), *Strengthening Partnerships Between Government and Civil Society: Malaysia*. 

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machinery in order to have timely interaction in the policy formulation and implementation/monitoring stages.

**Philippines**

Dr. Magno, from the La Salle Institute of Governance in the Philippines, studied the passage and implementation of two pieces of legislation. The Republic Act 8371, otherwise known as the *Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act* (IPRA) was signed into law on October 29, 1997. This law is considered to be landmark legislation in the area of social justice and human rights. The law is viewed as an important piece of legislation not only because of its recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples (IPs) to self-governance and to their ancestral domains, but also because it is a product of the collaboration between government, NGOs, and IPs.

The Republic Act (R.A.) 7610 - the *Special Protection of Children Against Child Abuse, Exploitation, and Discrimination Act* - was passed by the Philippine Congress on February 7, 1992 and was signed into law on June 17, 1992. This was landmark legislation as it defined new crimes or offenses that may be committed against children. The law also redefined other offenses or crimes contained in existing statutes. Additional categories of children requiring special protection were also provided for in the law. Like the IPRA, this bill was considered to be significant because it was passed by the Philippine Congress with the strong and active participation of civil society groups and government agencies.

The lessons learned in the Philippine case study include:

- **Civil society participation in the legislative process can be initiated by civil society itself,** which refutes the traditional and often-held notion that an individual or a group can participate in the legislative process only if and when an invitation to participate is extended by the legislature. Long before any proposed bill was relayed to Congress, indigenous peoples in the Philippines were already involved in various consultations as part of the peace process;
- **Effective partnerships require well-prepared partners.** Civil society actors must be ready to negotiate and bargain with legislators and other decision-makers and need to identify the areas which are non-negotiable and those on which they are willing to compromise;
- **The role of the media should be examined and fostered, particularly with respect to program monitoring.** This could focus the attention of politicians and government officials on taking the necessary actions to respond to children’s concerns.

**Canada**

In Canada, Mel Gill studied the development of a national children’s agenda and the response to child poverty through the development of a national child benefit program. The review focused on the roles of Canadian voluntary organizations, particularly the National Children’s Alliance and Campaign 2000, and their relationship and influence with the government of Canada in the evolution of public policy with respect to children’s benefits. The central focus of this study is on the relationship of the two primary organizations with governments as they sought to advance the

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21 Drawn from the case studies for this project prepared by Dr. Francisco Magno (2004), *Government-Civil Society Partnerships: Children’s Rights and Indigenous People’s Rights in the Philippines.*
development of the National Child Benefit, the National Children’s Agenda and the Early Childhood Development Initiative.

The lessons learned in the Canadian case study include:\(^{22}\):

- *Annual report cards* to measure progress on a social issue can be particularly powerful as a means of communication, education, generating commitment to a cause and supporting advocacy efforts;
- *Provision of toolkits and training to build capacity* in local areas can serve to build the capacity of member organizations to support the cause;
- *Positive, and sometimes personal, relationships* between key individuals on either side of a partnership must be nurtured. These can be critical to sharing of ‘inside’ information and may help diffuse conflicts, which are inevitable to most relationships.

**V. WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?**

Better social policy is a goal shared by civil society organizations and governments alike. Civil society organizations therefore need to play a key role in the policy process. The case studies in each of the five participating countries all speak to the value of this role. Such partnerships can lead to social policy that better reflects the needs of society and is more accepted by it.

Despite the different social, economic and cultural contexts of the five participating countries many common lessons emerged from the case studies, including the importance of: the broader policy environment; media and champions; having mechanisms and structures in place to facilitate consultation and collaboration; building capacity to work together; and taking into account that progress on social policy issues is most often incremental. Other common lessons learned include the need to focus on policy implementation, monitoring and performance measurement, and the need for civil society to have a better understanding of the government context.

1. *Influences Beyond Borders*

The international environment has a strong influence on national-level policy development. International conventions, standards set by international organizations, and political-level international meetings can accelerate action to address social policy issues.

2. *Role of the Media*

The media is a necessary ally of civil society in increasing visible pressure on government and mobilizing public support behind issues. It often falls on civil society to engage the media and get them involved in the policy process. Media can also be a tool for governments to get information on policies and programs out to the people. One word of caution: media often have

\(^{22}\) Drawn from the case study prepared for this project by Mel Gill (2004), *The Role of Canadian Voluntary Sector Organizations in Development of Public Policy Related to Benefits for Children.*
their own agendas, and may therefore not report the story as either side would have liked. Care needs to be taken that the right messages are being disseminated.

3. Mechanisms for Engagement
The right mechanisms, structures and processes are needed to facilitate consultation and collaboration between government and civil society. Once such formal mechanisms exist, both civil society and civil servants can work to enlarge that space. Informal mechanisms and routes of influence can also be very effective. These informal routes are a softer approach, often working at the personal level, away from the glare of either media or high-level politics. In general, civil society will often choose a variety of means of engaging government; including lobbying, public education, advocacy, and participation in consultations, demonstrations and more.

Government and civil society do not need to work in a collaborative manner throughout the policy process. Rather, there are times when both sectors need to work separately on the policy issue, to conduct their own research, look at policy options etc, and then come together to move the issue forward. It is essential to maintain trust and a genuine, respectful dialogue throughout the process.

4. Building Capacity to Work Together
When civil society and government work together the efforts are not always immediately successful. However, regardless of immediate results, the exercise works to build their capacity to collaborate with each other. A shared understanding of the issues is developed as well as a knowledge of how the other ‘side’ works.

5. The Gap between Policy Formation and Implementation
Many struggles that are won on the policy level fail to achieve the anticipated impact because of weak monitoring, enforcement and implementation. Civil society has a role in keeping up the pressure throughout the implementation phase, especially during budgeting processes. Civil society could also play a particularly useful role in monitoring and policy evaluation, but civil society organizations (CSOs) are seldom engaged in these processes. Government can help by setting up clear frameworks and operational guidelines so that civil servants, who do most policy implementation, have the space to engage civil society. It is also incumbent upon governments to support partnerships not only in rhetoric, but also in practice, by engaging in meaningful dialogue with civil society and by including CSOs not only in policy formulation but also policy implementation.

6. Progress Takes Time
Progress on social policy issues is most often incremental. Relationships, dynamics and contexts can change, necessitating shifts in partnerships and alliances. These shifts allow civil society to maintain its independence. Civil society needs to recognize the nature of change, in terms of when to push for more and when to accept a given scenario. The struggle then begins again, however, as civil society starts to work toward the next incremental change.
7. Champions Wanted
In almost all the case studies developed for this project, individuals and relationships were critical in moving issues ahead. This included the legislative champions in the Philippines cases, the activist minister in Thailand who pushed forward the issue of prostitution, and the influence of corporate and other public figures in the Indonesia case. The Malaysian case on women’s policy demonstrates the effect of mobilizing key people to put pressure on decision-makers at an individual level. Finding the right committed champions, who have positions of influence and prestige in their own sector, is key to helping move policy changes forward. Alternatively, the right champion can be ‘made’ or converted to the cause.

8. Understanding the Government and Civil Society Contexts
Civil society often has a poor understanding of how the government functions, particularly in terms of policy development and implementation. Knowledge of the workings of government and how to steer an issue through the many stages of the policy process (executive, bureaucratic, and political) is essential to having influence. Civil society must develop an understanding of the political realities of the process, especially the bargaining and compromise that is necessary to build support for a policy initiative. Civil society organizations need to recognize that while they generally represent a particular group or issue, government is responsible for and must balance the needs of its citizens. In turn, governments must recognize and make an effort to understand the civil society context in terms of who they represent, how they govern themselves and make decisions, and the realities and challenges of their funding situations.

Government and civil society organizations function in different time-frames and time horizons and it is important for both partners to keep this in mind as it can present both challenges and opportunities. For example, unlike civil society organizations, governments frequently face electoral cycles and have their windows of opportunity and commitments change. On the other hand, governments tend to speak with one voice when they do reach a decision, which is something that the consensual-based nature of CSOs often precludes, even though they can usually make decisions more quickly than governments.

9. Find the Common Ground
Diversity is the hallmark of a flourishing civil society and many civil society organizations (CSOs) compete for the same sources of funding, which can cause rivalries. In the end, however, civil society groups may experience greater success in pushing their agendas forward if they can develop some common ground. Moderate and activist groups have unique roles to play in influencing government policy that can be complimentary. This does not mean a civil society organization needs to relinquish its goals and objectives, but rather find common ground with other organizations on specific issues and initiatives. Collaboration does not need to be long-term, but longer term collaborations do have the potential to create a stronger, more unified voice on social policy issues.

10. Another Voice at the Table
Academics tend to play very different roles in the government – civil society relationship. In Thailand, academics often sit on consultative bodies. They are often seen by government as neutral and rational resources with strong technical capacities who have often been the teachers
of government officials. They can serve as a conduit between government and civil society, used by both partners to breach gaps and create synergies. The nature of the role played by academics in state-civil society relationships differs significantly in various countries. For example, a strong link between academics and civil society is only starting to emerge in Malaysia. In some other countries, the ability of academics to offer criticism is limited through the ‘official’ vetting of papers.

Academics can play a key role in providing both civil society and government with the data they need to make better decisions on social policy. For academics to be effective in this role, however, they must build partnerships with civil society, and civil society must, in turn, commit to reviewing information they have and to sharing this information with academics.

11. Will It Make Waves?
Government is often more open to consultation, dialogue and even partnership with civil society on what are perceived to be “low politics” issues. Often, matters such as women’s issues or children’s rights are perceived to be non-threatening to the overall mandate and power of the government, and may not attract significant media glare. Yet the government tends to be less interested in consulting civil society on other issues such as the economy or human rights, where there is less consensus among all of the stakeholders and where there are more pressing political concerns.

12. Taking the Accountability Challenge
While the demands on governments to be more transparent and accountable are well-recognized, civil society organizations need to demonstrate greater commitment to accountability, transparency and integrity and to ensure that they are well-governed themselves. This is particularly important as civil society organizations take on an increasing role in governance through partnerships with government and the private sector.

13. A Voice for Change
Public attitudes about certain social issues, such as prostitution in Thailand, can often limit the ability of civil society organizations to address the issues. Without broad public support, governments are unlikely to see the need to engage civil society in moving towards policy change. Public education (through media, government programs etc) is one tool for encouraging a shift in attitude, but this takes time.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Conclusions
Through the creation of case studies and the provision of opportunities for civil society and government representatives from all of the participating countries to engage, the project helped increase understanding of the opportunities and challenges that arise when civil society and government work together in the policy process. In particular, this project has:
• fostered dialogue between civil society and government on policy issues;
• provided an opportunity to learn from case studies, that outline practical approaches for strengthening the role of civil society in the policy process;
• helped build a network of government officials and civil society organizations in participating countries and across the region (and internationally) through which dialogue and relationship-building can continue;
• helped participating government officials and civil society representatives to build a better understanding of each other and the opportunities and constraints of social policy partnerships.

**Next Steps**
The research to date has also indicated a number of additional areas of research that could be undertaken, including:
• How can civil society-government partnerships extend to policy implementation, monitoring and evaluation?
• What impact can improved governance have on the policy capacity of civil society organizations?
• Are civil society networks more effective in changing social policy than single organizations?
• How does the representativeness of any civil society organization affect its ability to engage with government and other civil society organizations?