

CIVIL SOCIETY

A PROMISING CHANNEL FOR CITIZENS IN GHANA

by Christof Kurz

Three thousand people assembled in the Ghanaian town of Agona to watch five of the six candidates compete for the Afigya-Sekyere East parliamentary seat and debate on issues most relevant to the electorate. Similar debates took place in 41 other towns and villages in 22 of Ghana's 200 constituencies. The debates among parliamentary candidates were a novelty in Ghana and received an enthusiastic welcome. They were a testimony to the growing openness of Ghana's political discourse and one of the sure signs that democracy is gradually taking root in Ghana.

Organized by umbrella organizations of local civil society groups, the debates also marked the successful conclusion of IFES' three-year long effort to increase the capacity of local civil society organizations (CSOs) in 20 of Ghana's 110 administrative districts.

Ghana has had a history of strong and energetic CSOs dating back to the colonial era. Ghanaians have always come together voluntarily to address shared problems and defend their individual interests in a collective manner. However, these groups rarely entered the public realm, much less attempted to influence public policy. NGOs that did stray into the public domain were either co-opted into the corporatist structures established by the state—women, student and youth wings of the ruling party, cooperatives and trade unions—or were denied participation altogether.

However, civil society organizations provide a promising channel for citizens to make their interests heard by public officials, thus "limiting the power of the state...challenging its abuses of authority...educating citizens about their rights and responsibilities and building a culture of tolerance and civic engagement; incorporating marginal groups into the political process and enhancing their responsiveness to societal interests and needs," as scholar Larry Diamond puts it.

To address the lack of efficiency of local CSOs in Ghana, IFES, with funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), launched ECSELL. The objective of the effort is to strengthen the role of civil society and the civic-government relationship, thereby promoting democracy.

In 1998 and 1999, ECSELL held a series of skills-building workshops, in which representatives from 226 CSOs were trained together with more than 200 local government officials. The workshops covered issues such as the role of civil society, the structure of the local government, financial management skills, conflict resolution, and community problems. To allow the CSOs to apply their new skills, ECSELL awarded 78 small grants to CSOs in 1999 and 2000. The grants were used for advocacy and civic education activities on issues such as taxes, land allotment, teen pregnancy, or the education of girls. In the weeks before the December 2000 elections, ECSELL CSOs organized debates for candidates running for parliament in 24 of Ghana's 200 constituencies.



Large and enthusiastic crowds at public forums were not the only testimony to ECSELL's success. A baseline survey of civic society groups in the ECSELL districts and follow-up surveys taken throughout the duration of the program demonstrated an increased capacity of CSOs as a result of the workshops with 50% of the CSOs conducting regular fundraisers; 90% operating a bookkeeping system; and 80% having mobilized nonmembers for community activities.

In 1998 only 22% of the participating CSOs were able to name one policy that had happened as a result of civic advocacy. By 2000, this figure had increased to 62%. With approximately 60% of the participating CSOs being professional associations, their increased functioning capacity has helped create better economic conditions with changes made to the tax laws due to advocacy. With respect to the candidate debates, surveys administered after the event showed that 80% of those who attended said they had gained a better understanding of the candidates' positions.

ECSELL has received much praise from scholars and practitioners who have described it as "one of the most carefully designed and ambitious of all donor civil society interventions in Africa."

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