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Civil Society Overconcentration

by LADB Staff

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Just under half of 227 Honduran Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) controlled a total of US\$270 million in 2000, a quantity equivalent to 19% of the nation's general budget that same year and 16% of the 2002 budget. Financial resources controlled by CSOs in 2000 were greater than the amount of GDP invested in either public education in 1997 or public health in 1998.

A recently released study titled *Caracterizacion y Mapeo de las Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil en Honduras* catalogs Honduran CSOs, their philosophies, and budgets. The study was supported by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the Swedish Agency for International Cooperation, and was carried out by Honduran and foreign consultants. The study looked at nongovernmental and noncommercial organizations that focus on associations, chambers, cooperatives, foundations, churches, networks, and traditionally denominated nongovernmental organizations.

The goal of the study was "to provide civil society and related groups (governmental, community, international, business, and academic) a tool to assist in the identification and understanding of the civil sector." The need for the study stemmed from the increase in the number of CSOs since the 1980s and particularly following Hurricane Mitch in 1998. "The growth [of CSOs] has not been orderly nor facilitated participation and dialogue among state organizations either national or local and international cooperation agencies."

The study said that CSOs "appear to be confronting, on various levels, the dilemma between concentration and diversity, specialization and heterogeneity." The majority of CSOs operate in urban centers and address similar issues, neglecting other important areas. It said that 88% of CSOs are concentrated in the departments of Francisco Morazan and Cortes, which include the cities of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, respectively, although those departments represent only 32% of the country's population. Correspondingly, "just 1% of identified CSOs are located in the departments of Choluteca [south], Yoro [north], and Comayagua [central]. Together, these three departments represent 19% of the population."

Jose Aguilar of the Federacion de Organizaciones Privadas de Desarrollo de Honduras (FOPRIDEH) explained that most organizations are located in the capital because of the presence of other groups even though the work of these groups is often concentrated in the interior of the country. Aguilar acknowledged that CSOs are still absent from some areas, such as the Islas de la Bahia and Mosquitia.

The study also found a concentration in the issues addressed by CSOs, which tend to focus on education, women, gender, the environment, and microbusinesses, and ignore areas such as the defense of human rights and unemployment. Such thematic concentrations, the study continues, can be positive since health and education are important in the improvement of general conditions for the population. However, while 70% of the population depends on the informal economy, very few CSOs are dedicated to the problem of employment. Similarly, many people work in the maquila sector, yet no organizations concentrate on the defense of human rights.

The study also points out that, despite high levels of juvenile delinquency and drug consumption, only 6% of these organizations work in the field of addiction. Another finding is that there are low levels of youth and female participation within CSOs. The study said that "few organizations are dedicated to youth issues, children's rights, or increasing youth involvement in the community." Yet, 56% of Hondurans are under the age of 20, and a quarter of the population are between the ages of 15 and 24. Half the members of CSOs are between the ages of 40 and 49, but only 15% of Hondurans are in that age group. Similarly, 65% of CSO administrators are men. Of all paid CSO personnel, 54% are men.

This tendency is reversed, however, among volunteers where 65% are women. Officials and analysts call for greater control of CSOs. The study's results caused various reactions, including an editorial in the daily *La Prensa* calling for supervision of CSO resources, claiming they profit from the needs of the population.

Aguilar responded by explaining that there are different kinds of CSOs. Some are owned by individuals who turn a profit with their organization and lack a clear goal of providing service. Others have strict internal controls and tight links with international aid sources, helping to guarantee that resources are channeled to the target population. Nonetheless, Aguilar acknowledged the need for greater fiscal supervision of civil organizations. Aguilar explained that in the 1990s, particularly following Hurricane Mitch, there was a growth of civil organizations, many of which are directed by government officials and benefit from state resources and support.

In comparison, civil organizations with longer histories are currently very limited in the resources available to them. Aguilar said that, for the past seven years, FOPRIDEH has been working on guidelines for relationships between CSOs and the government. The proposal has failed to advance in Congress. He also said that FOPRIDEH is advocating a three-magistrate Tribunal Superior de Cuentas that would combine the country's comptroller bodies and supervision of CSOs.

Importance of civil society continues to increase

Civil organizations play an important role in the country's public policies and development projects, said Aguilar. They also contribute to the country's democratization process, and, in early 2002, had particular influence in constitutional reforms regarding the administration of justice. The reforms led to a Corte Suprema de Justicia whose 15 judges were elected by Congress from a list of 45 candidates identified by five civil and two state organizations.

A long-term project to improve democracy and lessen polarization in state organizations is currently being developed, said Aguilar. For this reason, it is essential that CSOs have a strong presence in the country and help direct development, democratization, and the job creation.

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