

THREE YEARS ON: THE SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL INFORMATION PLATFORM FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

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Contextual Background: The NPO Sector in South Africa

- The Civil Society sector in South Africa is characterised by a wide variety of organisations of different sizes and shapes across the social, political and economic spectrum of society. These range from faith based organisations, charities, social and sports clubs, issue driven organisations and a host of others working tirelessly on the social fabric of society.
- Literature on the subject of civil society posits that this sector plays an important role in societal change and stability that is critical for a functioning democracy. It also argues that civil society plays a critical role in the nurturing of social capital and that it says something of the health of society in social, political and economic terms. Robert Putnam and others go so far as to argue that the vibrancy of the sector is a much more reliable indicator for economic prosperity and public sector responsiveness in addressing societal needs. Arguments and studies abound, it is difficult to conceive a society without social forms of organisations and ignoring the impact it has on the functioning of society.
- The John Hopkins Study on “The Size and Scope of the Nonprofit Sector in South Africa” (2002) is the only comprehensive study of the sector. The study concluded that there were about 100 000 NPO with the combined operating expenditure of R 9.3 billion which represent 1.2% of the Gross Domestic Product and employing over 600 000 people, more than a number of major economic sectors. Although there are no current estimates, there is no doubt that this figure has increased considerably over the past few years and the value that it creates.

Building a Civil Society Information Platform in South Africa

Project Partners



Project Purpose

- The purpose of the initiative was to set up a comprehensive and accessible database as a single point of entry that captures *all* categories of CSO's to address the myriad of information needs of different stakeholders ranging from the public and private sectors to that of the civil society sector itself.
- The initiative was essentially about building a composite picture of society to start understanding what is happening and not happening. At the heart of it, it is about creating the means to gauge the health and makeup of our society. Effectively it is about add value to public and private efforts to strengthening civic engagement and social capital

Brief History

- The NMF and CSS entered into an exploratory collaboration in November 2004 to assess the feasibility of catalysing the implementation of a comprehensive South African civil society information platform on the nature and work of civil society organisations.
- In November 2006 the collaboration was extended to the National Department of Social Development and the National Development Agency to participate as principle partners in the initiative. A Memorandum of Understanding signed in May 2006 gives effect the collaboration.
- The exploratory work by the NMF and CSS entailed performing a scan of the South African civil society landscape and engaging in dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders on this issue. By the end of 2005 the following conclusions emerged from this dialogue:

Key Issues & Assumptions

- The initiative acknowledged the existence of other databases and similar initiatives. It also takes into consideration the current gaps in that these databases do not speak to each other nor is data on the sector available through a single point of entry for comparison, analysis, impact assessment, benchmarking and decision making.
- Stakeholders supported the idea of creating a public platform that could provide a *single point of entry* for information on the sector.
- As the custodians for the largest sets of data on CSO's, National Department of Social Development (DSD) and the National Development Agency (NDA) were well placed to facilitate the process for the establishment of such a system.
- The initiative envisaged the creation of a national database that is easily accessible by the public and used by a diverse range of civil society organisations as an opportunity to show case their work to the public.

Key Issues & Assumptions

- Improving and widening grant program mapping, resource (private and public) allocation, fundraising and reporting
- An extensive Civil Society Public Information Platform as a *single point of entry* for data on the sector would be of great value to the development sector. Potential advantages would be encouraging growth, sharing and learning amongst actors
- Assessment by various stakeholders on the impact of inter-programmes, intra programmes will be more reliable, faster and of better quality
- It will aid public sector programme planning, budgeting and allocation for resources on a more equitable basis

Key Issues & Assumptions

- Positively impact on the way donors (international, public and corporate social investment) gives – to give where it matters!
- Donors (public and private) will also be able to assess the spread and impact of the way they give - giving to empower!
- It would assist with strengthening the regulatory environment, stimulating compliance (legislatively and socially), transparency, effective governance and self regulation within the sector
- Create a public profile of a wider range of locally based organisations that normally goes unnoticed
- Strengthening engagement within the sector and between the sector and private and public sector

Project Value Proposition

- **To Non-Profit Organisations (NPO's)**
 - Offers all NPO's, regardless of their size or means, a free opportunity to explain their work and demonstrate their accountability to the public. This will particularly be of benefit to the small emerging *community based organisations*
 - Increases the visibility and access of South African NPO's to a significant range of local and international grant makers, donors and other potential givers and supporters
 - Streamlines non-profit reporting to government, grant makers, donors, intermediaries, and any individuals, researchers, institutions and agencies requesting information about their work.
 - Allows nonprofits to understand the work of peer organizations and access benchmarking data.
 - Strengthen networking, sharing and learning amongst organisations

Project Value Proposition

To Individual Donors and Institutional Grant makers

- Gives donors the tools to identify, compare and track the records of nonprofits undertaking activities that they wish to support.
- Allows donors a means to empower through their philanthropy, confirm the credibility and charitable status of any fundraising entity, assess the strategy, programmes, organizational capacity and impact of the NPO's work and gain greater confidence and satisfaction in philanthropy.
- Satisfies grant makers' first level of due diligence for grant applicants.
- Allows convenient mapping of grant program areas.
- Permits grant makers to identify other nonprofits, for comparison purposes, that are similar to grant applicants and identify other funders who have committed resources to specific nonprofits.
- Enable donors and grant makers to give where it matters

Project Value Proposition

To Government and public agencies

- Provides data and analytical tools to support the regulatory framework
- Generates increasingly higher quality reporting and compliance by non-profits.
- Supports public disclosure objectives and eliminates costly public requests for nonprofits' reports.
- Establishes electronic systems that can replace or pre-empt inefficient legacy systems.
- Use basic data more effectively through high level research to support programme planning and resource allocation on an equitable basis
- Deepen the levels of service delivery by leveraging the value of information

Project Value Proposition

- **To Policy Makers, professionals and 3rd party service providers**
 - Provides an objective data set on the non-profit sector
 - Enables policy makers to identify geographies and interventions that are over or under-served by nonprofits and programmes.
 - Supports decision-making and planning by enabling policy makers to track the trends in philanthropy and non-profit service, by sub sector, issue and geography.
 - Generates information that enables providers of professional services to support and advise their non-profit or corporate clients, is the foundation for sector statistics and informs the work of academic researchers/policy analysts.
 - It is a standard and public information platform for stakeholders. It provides data to third parties that may promote electronic philanthropy by the public or those that advocate more efficient grant making or more holistic evaluation and assessment of the sector.

Project Value Proposition

- **To Society in General**
 - Establishes transparency and good governance as the accepted practice in non-profit sector activity.
 - Fosters better allocation of resources to non-profits
 - Encourages the restructuring of charitable activity to eliminate redundant service provision and promote activity in underserved markets.
 - Increases the amount of philanthropy generally.

Three years on: What has been achieved

- **Stakeholder Consultation**
 - A considerable amount of consultation took place in 2005 in meeting with some of the key players in the development field. All of them generally agreed that such a platform will have a positive impact on the development landscape, and would revolutionise the way the sector is perceived.
- **Memorandum of Understanding**
 - MoU signed between the three project partners
- **CSS seed funding**
- **No financial commitment from participating Project Partners**
- **More than 30 000 entries in the NPO Database cleaned up**

Lessons Learnt

- (Positive outcomes)
 - Mobilisation of the sector
 - Political will at government level
 - Project manager appointed (at least for the first years)
- Negative Outcomes
 - Political will but no financial commitment
 - Different level of understanding among Project sponsors
 - Progress very slow
 - Initial champions have moved on
 - Sustainability of project uncertain
 - Risk management issues

Conclusions

It takes effort & time to build systems even if the value proposition is that obvious!!

Thanks for your attentive listening