

Introduction

This document is a summary report on the South Asia Partnership Canada 1997 Annual Forum on *Strengthening Civil Society: Progressive Strategy or Smokescreen?*, held in Ottawa, Calgary and Antigonish between October 1-8. It provides an overview of the workshops, including key outputs, lessons learned in terms of planning and organizing the workshop and follow-up. The substantive content of workshop presentations and discussions are not included: they are being prepared as a sourcebook on civil society and will be completed by May 1998.

The Issues

In NGO and donor circles, everyone is talking about civil society — about the role of not-for-profit associations, autonomous from the state, in assisting locally and internationally disadvantaged communities and in protecting democracy. Many of us are trying to understand what civil society means to our work within Canada and abroad. As a concept, does it place our efforts in a broader, more empowering context? Does it divert resources from assisting those who are disadvantaged? Does it reflect an abrogation of responsibilities on the part of the government? Practically, how do organizations go about strengthening civil society? Is the concept too vague to be useful? Is this a new approach — have we changed what we do or the way in which we do what we do? How do we develop the needed analytical tools to help NGOs plan, implement and assess civil society strategies more effectively? What are the pros and cons to this approach?

The Workshops

These questions deserve exploration. To this end, South Asia Partnership held a series of workshops on *Strengthening Civil Society: Progressive Strategy or Smokescreen?* in three locations across Canada. The workshops involved a total of 218 participants, 10 resource people from South Asia, 2 from the U.K. and 38 from Canada.

Overview of the Workshops						
Location	Dates	Host	# of Part.	# of Resource People from		
				South Asia	Can	UK
Ottawa, Ontario	Oct. 1-3	SAP-Canada (held at IDRC)	93	8	15	2
Calgary, Alberta	Oct. 6-8	Division of Int'l Dev., U of C	47	5	11	1
Antigonish, Nova Scotia	Oct. 6-8	Coady Int'l Institute	78	5	13	1
TOTALS			218	10 ¹	38 ¹	2 ¹

1. This figure does not equal the sum of those above since several resource people participated in more than one workshop.