

The role of civil society

Abstract

Civil society includes a diverse set of citizen's organizations which have gained increasing visibility in the last half century, in part because of the desire of the citizenry to participate more actively in the democratic process and to influence public policy. National and global thematic civil society organizations that deal with noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) have existed for a long time, but recently a global umbrella organization has been formed to give greater input into the international processes and policies related to NCDs. My experience has been in relation to this global organization-the NCD Alliance as well as to a major Caribbean regional NCD Coalition. The major function of these organizations is to advocate for NCDs in the appropriate fora. This advocacy is not only to governments but also to the intergovernmental processes in train. The most important asset in the ability to advocate effectively is the possession and utilization of appropriate information directed to the appropriate audience. In addition, these organizations perform the function of assuring accountability of governments and the private sector in terms of commitments made. They track the development of the processes outlined in the various policies and strategies and contribute directly or indirectly to the outcomes. Other functions of civil society may include protecting the public interest by ensuring that there are no conflicts of interest in the course of execution of policy and in addition some provide direct service to governments. The legitimacy of civil society playing an active role in the prevention and control of NCDs was enhanced by the Political Declaration of the UN High Level Meeting of September 2011, which called for not only a whole of government approach, but also a whole of society one and the latter by definition must involve civil society as the third factor that should play a role in the participatory governance espoused by the Ashgabat Declaration.