

Solutions to common operational challenges to working with civil society in development co-operation and humanitarian assistance

Inputs in this brief are drawn from the 2 June 2021 **technical virtual Workshop ‘Towards building forward better together: finding solutions to enable civil society’** organised by the OECD Development Co-operation Directorate (DCD) on the occasion of the 2021 virtual **OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Civil Society Days (CSDs)** (27 May - 4 June). The CSDs raised awareness on the important role of and challenges faced by civil society, and mobilised and generated momentum among the development co-operation community for a Call to Action to enable civil society to respond to crises and development needs. The video of the **high-level virtual event: ‘A Call to Action: Enabling civil society in the context of Covid-19’** held on 04 June is available [here](#).

Building on the momentum of the CSDs Call to Action, on 6 July the **DAC adopted the Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance** (EN [link](#); FR [link](#)). It is the first international standard focused on the actions of donors that is specific to enabling civil society as a contributor to the 2030 Agenda and its pledge to leave no one behind, and to protecting and strengthening democracy. OECD evidence sources that contributed to the Recommendation’s development include the: 2020 DAC Members and Civil Society [Study](#); the 2020 Foresight Policy [Paper](#) on Digital transformation and the futures of civic space to 2030; and the 2018 Development Co-operation [Report](#) chapter on civil society and leaving no one behind. The inputs from the CSDs 2 June Workshop can contribute to the development of practical toolkits to support the implementation of the Recommendation.

The 2 June Workshop brought together DAC Donors, other providers, partner country governments and CSOs. It facilitated knowledge exchange and mutual learning around key ingredients to successfully enable CSOs to maximise their contribution to the Covid-19 recovery and achievement of the SDGs. Participants discussed experiences as well as initiatives and reports reflecting good practices and policies relating to the topics listed in the following sections. The main messages and findings are reflected below.

Break-out Session A: Solutions to shift power to civil society at the local level and build resilience from the bottom-up

Strengthening local ownership and promoting the leadership of civil society actors in partner countries is considered as a good development co-operation practice. Despite this recognition, donors, partner country governments and CSOs face barriers to shifting decision-making power and resources to partner country civil society. **To address this challenge, participants considered it was important to:**

- ✓ **Put power dynamics on the agenda and address them.** Identify who holds power and what type of power. Recognise that power imbalances relate to capacity, opportunities, resources, and to internalised inequalities.
- ✓ **Acknowledge that building partnerships on an equal footing can also consist in redefining one’s role** and, if needed, taking a step back.
- ✓ **Apply a bottom-up approach by default.** Collaborate with local CSOs to understand the problems at the grassroots’ level and jointly develop programmes and national response plans, including in times of crisis. This requires more research and consultations to understand their exact needs, expectations and priorities as well as to solicit their inputs and expertise; and putting in place measures for participatory decision-making across all the stages of programming, including regarding the vision and funding.
- ✓ **Shift away from rigid design plans and target outcomes and from strict requirements toward more direct, flexible and adaptive funding** including core or programme-based support, such as seen with the Dutch MFA’s Human Rights Fund for southern human rights organisations to protect civic freedoms and space.
- ✓ **Support local CSOs to align with partner country governments’ national development agendas** to ensure a more integrated and coordinated approach to achieve national development objectives faster.

- ✓ *Establish coordination frameworks between donors, local CSOs and partner country governments* to enhance dialogue, collaboration and trust-based relations, foster transparency and avoid duplication. For example, Kenya's CSO partnership framework currently under development aims to offer a space for feedback and information-sharing, inclusive representation and coordination between the government and Kenya's wide range of civil society actors.
- ✓ *Encourage joint efforts with partner country governments* relating to civic education, awareness raising, and dissemination of consistent information and communication at the community level.
- ✓ *Support capacity-building initiatives* especially for nascent local CSOs, by: *providing institutional and financial support alongside trainings* in programme development, delivery, and M&E; *encouraging pairing with more experienced organisations* towards fostering real empowerment, autonomy and a sense of agency among local CSOs; while *being mindful of the narrative around partner country CSOs needing constant capacity building* as this is not always the case. Many are strong and capable and are only in need of flexible, long-term, trust-based funding.
- ✓ *Encourage innovation* among local CSOs to pilot and learn from new initiatives, strategies or best practices.
- ✓ *Support national CSO umbrella organisations/platforms/networks* that offer a range of services and support which local CSOs can benefit from e.g. access to information and intelligence such as funding and advocacy opportunities, capacity building, and coalition-building.
- ✓ *Leverage digitalisation to reach local actors*, giving them access to digital means to participate, and transferring funds to them.
- ✓ *Review and assess the success of the Siem Reap CSO Consensus* on the International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness at its 10-year anniversary, looking at provisions relating to effective partnerships with donors, including international CSOs and local CSOs playing a donor role.
- ✓ *Encourage greater representation of local CSOs in international fora.*

Resources shared by participants during the Workshop

- ✓ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Human Rights Fund ([link](#))
- ✓ Siem Reap CSO Consensus on the International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness ([link](#))

Break-out Session B: Solutions to create an enabling environment for civil society

Diminishing respect for human rights and democracy around the globe in a context of rising autocratisation is eroding the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and expression, and posing a real threat to civil society, civic space, and civic engagement more broadly. This threat has heightened in the Covid-19 context, with the pandemic used as a pretext for disproportionate, overly broad and potentially enduring restrictions on civic space and freedoms. **To address this challenge, participants considered it was important to:**¹

- ✓ *Strengthen a pluralist and independent civil society* including through regular dialogue between CSOs, governments and donors in donor countries, partner countries and in international fora.
- ✓ *Identify and explore ways to co-operate with "GONGOS"* – government-organised NGOs.
- ✓ *Address challenges relating to digital transformation* including through, for example, the creation of a UN Special Rapporteur on digital technology and human rights; and digital capacity building of CSOs.
- ✓ *Strengthen support to human rights defenders* by, for example, adopting a political strategy on human rights defenders; creating a dedicated fund; supporting their visa applications; and hosting them.
- ✓ *Strengthen the transparency, accountability and effectiveness of CSOs'* interventions, actions and results on the ground in support of public policies by: *fostering partnership opportunities among CSOs* to exchange experiences, good practices, lessons and engage in joint initiatives; *providing technical assistance and trainings*; and *investing in innovative capacity building* to strengthen the organisational capacity of CSOs to improve their internal governance and accountability including through triangular co-operation initiatives. For example, in 2019 the Mexican Agency for International Co-operation for Development (AMEXCID) engaged with GIZ to strengthen Mexican CSOs and their capacities to network

¹ Inputs are drawn from France's National Council for Development and International Solidarity (CNDSI) Working Group on Civil Society Report: 'Creating a supportive environment for civil society.'

and exchange good practices and lessons; and in 2020, with UNDP to build CSOs' capacities to include human rights and gender perspectives in their work.

- ✓ *Consult CSOs in the development of international development co-operation programmes*, following the example of AMEXCID, which consulted with CSOs in 2019 in the development of its 2019-2024 program.

Resources shared by participants during the Workshop

- ✓ Information on France's National Council for Development and International Solidarity (CNDSI) ([link](#))
- ✓ Report on 'Creating a supportive environment for civil society' produced by France's CNDSI ([link](#))
- ✓ AMEXCID's International Co-operation for Development Program 2019-2024 "PROCID" ([link](#))
- ✓ AMEXCID – GIZ- Civil Society Program "PROFOSC" ([link](#)); AMEXCID-UNDP co-operation ([link](#))
- ✓ Podcast on 'Civic space in the context of Strengthening Civil Society' produced by the Dutch MFA ([link](#))
- ✓ Forus' podcasts "A Space for Us" which discuss civil society and civic space issues ([link](#))
- ✓ Balkan Civil Society Development Network platform on the Effects of COVID-19 on Civil Society ([link](#))
- ✓ Institute of Development Studies synthesis report 'Navigating Civic Space in a Time of Covid' ([link](#))

Break-out Session C: Solutions to unlock partnership potentials with more diverse civil society actors

Civil society is diverse and includes informal forms such as social movements, newer forms such as social enterprises, and traditional forms such as faith-based organisations. Despite this, development co-operation actors tend to work with the 'usual suspects', including the typically urban, often international or donor country-based CSOs. **To address this challenge, participants considered it was important to:**

- ✓ *Establish a national development co-operation policy, which clearly states the need to promote a favourable environment for engagement with all civil society*, following the model of the Peruvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' international technical co-operation policy.
- ✓ *Acknowledge the differentiated role* of civil society actors and that civil society is not a homogenous group.
- ✓ *Map and identify contributions that all civil society actors could offer* beyond the "usual suspects".
- ✓ *Support the creation of and fund platforms, alliances or networks of different partner country civil society actors* from e.g. unregistered protest groups to human rights defenders. Put in place a non-branded basket fund from various donors, designed and governed by the platforms themselves, for rapid response, emergency or seed funding to frontline groups or actors, using light application and reporting processes.
- ✓ *Simplify and lessen administrative requirements and demands* to streamline and facilitate processes of engagement with all the different potential actors within civil society.
- ✓ *Develop mechanisms to address financial risks* that could result from engaging with informal civil society actors who, for example, might not have formal registrations, boards, or bank accounts. Following Sida's approach, this could include developing a "financial routine" to share financial risks with Sida's partners to encourage them to also support informal actors to a larger degree.
- ✓ *Issue statements of political support and protection* of diverse civil society actors at partner country level, including via the UN system.
- ✓ *Co-design programs and projects with diverse civil society actors* factoring in innovative partnership modalities that are adequate, relevant and respond to partnership needs on the ground.
- ✓ *Adopt differentiated funding mechanisms and partnership frameworks* that are adapted to diverse actors and are not only project-based but also based on long-term open communication channels and participatory processes with these actors.
- ✓ *Engage with CSO umbrella organisations and networks* in partner countries as an entry point to expand outreach to and build trust with a greater variety of civil society actors.
- ✓ *Change the narrative relating to partnerships with local CSOs* to one that appreciates the strength and capacity of partner country CSOs and respects their right of initiative.
- ✓ *Hold systematic and meaningful dialogue and consultations* between donor embassies or offices at partner country level with the participation of a vast range of partner country civil society actors.
- ✓ *Avoid "selective inclusion"* and encourage well-established donor country or international CSOs operating in partner countries to invite less known civil society actors they work with to the table.

Resources shared by participants during the Workshop

- ✓ Task Team Synthesis Report: 'Helping and Hindering factors for Effective CSO Engagement in the SDGs' ([link](#))

- ✓ OECD Development Matters Blog: 'Implementing the SDGs: why are some CSOs being left behind?' ([link](#))
- ✓ Guiding Principles for Sida's Engagement with and Support to Civil Society ([link](#))
- ✓ Movilizadorio – citizen engagement and social innovation lab ([link](#))
- ✓ Peruvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' international technical co-operation policy ([link](#))

Break-out Session D: Solutions to navigate risk management: making CSO effectiveness, accountability and resilience work in times of crisis and beyond

Real or perceived shortcomings in CSO's accountability and effectiveness are used to justify civic space restrictions and fuel anti-civil society narratives. They also further risk aversion, preventing partnerships with civil society to live up to the scale of the challenges and support needed by CSOs. **To address this challenge, participants considered it was important to:**

- ✓ *Recognise that good risk management applies to all*, including donors and CSOs of all sizes.
- ✓ *Define the risk appetite and agree on a "balance of risks"*. Be clear about what the risks are, discuss them and communicate about them with stakeholders to reach a common understanding of the risks each stakeholder is willing to take.
- ✓ *Calibrate risk management and requirements expectations*. Accountability capacities are not at the same levels within the civil society sector, and donors need to be realistic, calibrate and communicate what is appropriate in terms of risk management.
- ✓ *Accommodate innovation; flexibility to adapt; and the "freedom to fail" in risk management*. Be willing to fund and support experimental approaches and pilots led by CSOs; adapt or adjust systems of accountability especially in times of crisis; and accept that outcomes may not be delivered.
- ✓ *Put things in perspective*: Not engaging with CSOs to address crises and development needs will be much riskier than any perceived risks taken by engaging with CSOs.
- ✓ *Have good systems and mechanisms in place to uphold accountability and build reassurances*. Donors and CSOs can't control their risk environment, but they can control their preparedness and their response with good risk-management plans and systems following the example of the Chilean Fund. Such mechanisms include e.g. capacity assessments of CSOs; risk evaluations pertaining to human rights, gender, indigenous communities, social environmental impacts; and periodic M&E.
- ✓ *Provide assistance and foster collaboration among CSOs to strengthen accountability capacities* to be transparent and responsive. Donors and CSOs can develop practical guidance for CSOs to mitigate risks, for example on financial management; safeguarding; etc. For example, the Irish CSO 'Frontline Defenders' developed a toolkit on cyber security and digital protection at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- ✓ *Engage in learning exchanges*. For example: how to uphold good governance during lockdowns; how to sustain inclusive and participatory approaches in decision-making; how relying on local partners and connections with local communities can help CSOs overcome accountability challenges in pandemic-affected populations; what remote accountability looks like in the digital era.
- ✓ *Avoid double standards*. In conversations with the stakeholders they are accountable to (e.g. governments; parliaments; and the public), donors should request that the same flexibility and space for error granted in domestic partnerships with CSOs should be extended to development co-operation.
- ✓ *Adhere to the Global Standard for CSO accountability* and its 12 commitments to strengthen accountability practices.
- ✓ *Practice "dynamic accountability"* i.e. upward accountability to the donor; downward accountability to beneficiaries and constituents; and horizontal accountability to e.g. board members. It requires systems for inclusive and participatory feedback, horizontal partnerships based on mutual trust, and putting beneficiaries and constituents at the centre of CSOs' decision-making process for greater responsiveness.
- ✓ *Adopt a proactive approach to communication* with the public to prevent misinformation and sustain trust by maintaining dialogue through online communications when face-to-face interactions are not possible; and developing specific communication channels to directly reach out to targeted groups.

Resources shared by participants during the Workshop

- ✓ Global Standard for CSO accountability ([link](#)) and "dynamic accountability" approach ([link](#))
- ✓ Frontline Defenders' cyber protection toolkit ([link](#))
- ✓ Chilean Fund ([link](#))