

DETERMINANTS OF CIVIL SOCIETY AID EFFECTIVENESS: A CCIC DISCUSSION PAPER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I INTRODUCTION

Donors have been constructing a new aid architecture based on lessons in aid effectiveness drawn from past decades of development cooperation. To date, donor strategies for aid effectiveness have single-mindedly focused on donor-government relationships. They have also implied that the principles in the *Paris Declaration*, a 2005 expression of donor commitments to aid reform, are applicable to all development actors, including civil society organizations. The purpose of this discussion paper is to explore the universality of the *Paris Declaration* principles in relation to the development roles of civil society organizations.

The paper attempts to distinguish between the foundations for effective official donor cooperation and those that shape CSO international cooperation. Civil society organizations are development actors in their own right. An understanding of their roles in pursuit of poverty reduction, equality and justice is essential for clarifying CSO effectiveness.

In international cooperation, it is argued, at their most effective, CSOs mobilize resources and build international relationships in solidarity with efforts of poor and marginalized people to claim their rights and hold governments accountable. CSOs are expressions of active citizenship. The centrality of CSOs in building democratic culture and promoting alternatives, however, is seen to be in tension with a narrow donor interpretation of “ownership” in the *Paris Declaration*. While civil society is largely missing from the *Declaration*, the assumption that civil society can be simply subsumed under the *Declaration*’s principles and commitments may undermine key conditions that make CSOs effective development actors.

II A RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

CSO support for current donor reforms to strengthen their aid effectiveness is guarded. They raise three key questions: Aid effectiveness for what purpose? Aid effectiveness for whom? Aid effectiveness as measured by whom? Increasingly CSOs are adopting a human right framework in their answers to these questions.

According to the *Declaration* the intended purpose of donor reforms is to help meet goals for poverty reduction, including the Millennium Development Goals. However, the *Declaration*’s aid effectiveness agenda focuses, not on conditions for effective poverty reduction, but on institutional reforms in government for a more effective and efficient *aid system*, with the seeming assumption that government actions alone will reduce poverty.

Most CSOs welcome the role of aid in strengthening of Southern governments in poor countries to meet their human rights obligations for health care or education for their citizens. But they suggest that a truer measure of aid effectiveness should be how aid resources actually affect the conditions that sustain dehumanizing poverty and inequality. Unfortunately, the *Paris Declaration* objectives and assessment indicators for donor commitments do not address this question. An alternative framework is required.

CCIC, together with other civil society networks around the world, have argued for rights-based obligations as a normative and organizing framework for monitoring donor progress in the aid system. This approach underscores the primacy and application of internationally-agreed to human rights instruments, including the Right to Development.

Actions to counter poverty are inherently political. National political will, strategies and institutional capacities on the part of government are certainly essential, but governments alone (often under the influence of economic and political elites) are often insufficient. These limitations have been compounded by the external insertion of commercial, security and political interests of donors and transnational corporations, who limit political space for alternative government policies in poor countries. Political and social movement organizing, by those living in poverty or otherwise marginalized in their society, is essential to their efforts to claim their rights. One of the central implications of using a human rights framework for aid effectiveness, then, is the need to take into account these links between sustainable development change and the efforts of engaged citizens.

III CSO ROLES AND CHALLENGES IN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

Where do civil society organizations fit in citizens' efforts to reduce poverty and claim rights? CSO roles are inevitably defined by their diversity, which in turn is reflected in widely differing organizational values, objectives, intervention sectors, organizational structures, interests and resources. But at their heart, *effective* CSO roles, if understood within a rights framework, promote citizen participation and democracy and reflect the values of seeking socio-economic justice and connecting as global citizens.

Evolving substantially over the past 30 years, strategic CSO roles are located largely, but not exclusively, among Southern CSOs (SCSOs), others are shared North/South roles in international cooperation, while others focus on Northern CSOs (NCSOs). While there are certainly role distinctions between CSOs in the North and the South, there is also increasing overlap as a result of the globalized CSO activities, their convergence into networks, and the (sometimes controversial) expansion of some large NCSOs as Southern development actors.

The most important **CSO strategic roles** identified are:

1. Collaborating in solidarity with poor and marginalized citizens;
2. Articulating and coalescing of citizen interests for democratic governance in the South;
3. Advancing gender equality, particularly the rights of poor and marginalized women;

4. Expanding space for citizens' voices, particularly in the South, in policy dialogue;
5. Stimulating innovations grounded in the realities of where poor people live and work;
6. Building capacity in various areas relevant to social change;
7. Networking and learning, leveraging CSO knowledge and CSO policy perspectives;
8. Mobilize and leveraging Northern financial and human resources; and
9. Promoting expressions of global citizenship and exchange for global social justice.

According to CCIC's *Code of Ethics*, partnerships "should be vehicles for long-term accompaniment that support the rights of peoples to determine and carry out activities that further their own development options". Southern CSOs have identified challenges in such North/South partnerships affecting SCSOs' effectiveness as development actors. The core challenge is the profound imbalance of power in favour of the Northern CSO and official donor. A rights approach to aid effectiveness implies abandoning a "charity model" of Northern "giving", in favour of mutual solidarity and respect for the autonomy of SCSOs.

What then are some of **the challenges for effectively supporting rights and justice** through partnerships, as seen by Southern CSOs?

1. Northern CSO project modalities and sector priorities limit Southern CSO autonomy and legitimacy, with scarce financing for SCSO democratic processes and advocacy for rights.
2. Weak Southern CSO institutional capacities coexist with challenging socio-economic, political and conflictual situations, and with major infrastructure deficiencies.
3. Restrictive Southern government legal conditions imposed on legitimate SCSO roles are compounded by NCSOs, subject to "anti-terrorism" reporting / financing restrictions.
4. Opportunities are limited for effective influence and *critical* monitoring of government policy by SCSOs, with donor/government dialogue taking place behind closed doors.
5. SCSOs are often confronted with insensitivity and lack of understanding of local needs, culture and knowledge on the part of Northern CSOs and donors.

IV CONDITIONS FOR IMPROVED EFFECTIVENESS IN CSO INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Most Northern CSOs make institutional choices through their funding modalities with Southern counterparts. In doing so, this paper argues, they should be guided by assessments of effective contributions to poverty reduction and justice by Southern counterparts, taking into account a rights-based approach. There is no assumption that NCSO choices are currently being made along these lines. Clearly there are important dynamics of power at play between NCSOs and SCSOs, as there are for official donors. Three major areas for reform shape the possibilities for more effective NCSO support for counterparts in the South.

1. Quality North/South CSO relationships should reflect rights-based principles that maximize SCSO capacities to claim “ownership” over their own development politics with local constituencies, governments and multilateral institutions.
2. Internal NCSO operating procedures should be consistent with the principles, reducing the impact of Northern “operational imperatives” and staff presumptions on working relationships and structures of democratic accountability with Southern counterparts.
3. CSO aid effectiveness is highly contingent upon official donor influence on the ability of NCSOs to respond effectively to SCSO-determined needs and approaches. A one-size-fits-all logic of “alignment” with donor/PRSP “priorities” or artificial “harmonization” with donor operational policies at a country level may ignore SCSO priorities.

The **principles**, drawn from CCIC’s *Code of Ethics*, as well as 30 years of CSO experience, include a negotiated shared vision, a mutual respect for diversity and difference, honesty and transparency in commitments and obligations, a climate of mutual trust and equity in the working relationship, and a commitment to share knowledge. The key to effective CSO engagements for global justice and reducing poverty and contributing to global justice will be efforts to put these principles into practice.

While each CSO relationship is unique, the paper identifies some **indicators of NCSO practice** that suggest partnerships based on equality, solidarity and mutual respect:

- ❑ Mutually-acceptable signed agreement(s) in compliance with CSO Codes of Conduct;
- ❑ Negotiated levels of funding and the timely release of funds;
- ❑ Increased levels of SCSO institutional funding, with greater flexibility in accountability;
- ❑ Information sharing a regular part of the operating context for the NCSO and the SCSO;
- ❑ Demonstrated efforts to rely on Southern expertise and Southern-directed CSOs;
- ❑ NCSO solidarity policy initiatives, responsive to SCSO policy and advocacy roles; and
- ❑ Increased NCSO support for Southern-directed CSO networks, coalitions and alliances.

NCSO institutional operations will contribute to aid effectiveness in the South if the organization is:

- ❑ Articulating a clearly understood institutional (rights-based) mandate and values;
- ❑ Adhering and assessing goals and approaches against relevant Codes of Conduct;
- ❑ Addressing potential tensions between NSCO revenue generation / profile and values;
- ❑ Devoting significant resources, including staff time, to North/South learning and training;
- ❑ Facilitating, not imposing, development processes, taking direction from SCSOs;
- ❑ Providing more un-earmarked core support to long-term trustful SCSO relationships;
- ❑ Implementing accountability to minimize compromising “downward” accountability;

- ❑ Facilitating coherent policy messages in collaboration with Southern counterparts, including Southern-led networks and coalitions; and
- ❑ Encouraging risk-taking and leadership for North/South empowerment, sensitivity to local context and conditions.

Donors policies and practices have a significant influence on the potential quality of CSO relationships and thereby their effectiveness as development actors. CSOs have identified a number of donor reforms in aid practices that would improve CSO capacities to structure effective and principled working relationships with counterparts and constituencies.

- ❑ Respect CSOs as development actors in their own right, not subsidiary to donor priorities;
- ❑ Provide a mixture of funding options, with substantial priority for responsive funding;
- ❑ Assure long-term predictable funding, permitting core and program support of SCSOs;
- ❑ Limit donor imposed competition for resources, particularly between NCSOs and SCSOs;
- ❑ Engage CSOs systematically on poverty-reduction strategies, including budget support;
- ❑ Enable CSOs as democratic facilitators of government accountability to poor communities;
- ❑ Implement and simplify operational requirements, permitting NCSOs to structure equitable SCSO partnerships for autonomous CSO locally-controlled development efforts.

V CONCLUSIONS

At their best, CSOs create bridges between local civic actions and national/global civil society aspirations that are responsive to the realities where poor and marginalized people live. They cannot, and must not, replace the responsibility and human rights obligations of government and citizens. At the same time, CSOs, as expressions of active citizenship, should not be considered subsidiary to government development plans.

On the surface, CSO aid effectiveness principles could seem to fit with those in the *Paris Declaration* – ownership, alignment, harmonization, mutual accountability. However, the implementation of the *Declaration* is largely carried out by donors and a few officials in the central governments of the poorest countries. Current donor practices in harmonization and alignment, with aid conditionality, will limit the achievement of real local “ownership”.

The goals for civil society, by contrast, are more closely aligned with the principles of democratic culture which requires respect and encouragement of pluralities of views, policy and development alternatives. Democratic culture in the South would be limited if constrained artificially by super-imposed donor/local government strategies for harmonization of all external and local development CSO actors. Donor and CSO approaches to effective development cooperation may sometimes be in tension. But it is a tension that CSOs will argue is at the heart of democratic practice, upon which the sustainability of results from donor development interventions depends.

CSOs themselves must take leadership, acknowledging that their practices must continue to evolve and change. The paper suggests some avenues for these changes. The solution, however, may not be a few civil society-oriented paragraphs into the *Paris Declaration* with the assumption that CSOs could then align themselves with the *Declaration* principles and commitments. The challenge is a deeper one to both CSOs and donors to reflect on actions to end poverty consistent with human rights obligations and approaches.