

DEFINITION

ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

An enabling environment is a set of interrelated conditions – such as legal, organisational, fiscal, informational, political, and cultural – that impact on the capacity of development actors such as CSOs to engage in development processes in a sustained and effective manner”

Thindwa, 2001

The development effectiveness of CSOs is affected by both conditions internal to CSOs and external in government and donor practices.

OUTLINING THE ISSUE

A flourishing civil society requires an enabling environment, which depends upon the actions and policies of all development actors – including governments, donors and CSOs. Currently, conditions vary enormously from country to country ranging from what could be defined as a ‘disabling’ environment, even oppressive environment, in some cases, to restrictive or problematic environments, to what may be considered models of good practice, setting an example for others to follow, in other instances.

CSO development effectiveness is premised on mutually reinforcing internal and external factors. Internal factors primarily relate to CSOs’ capacity, the embodiment of principles of CSO development effectiveness, and collective structures and mechanisms. External factors relate to the recognition of the role and voice of CSOs and the development of an enabling environment for CSOs to operate.

What constitutes an enabling environment is a complex set of conditions. These include:

- **CSO Recognition:**
 - a. Political factors and other circumstances influencing CSO recognition and operations. These may include mechanisms to ensure the promotion and protection of human rights, including the rights of expression, peaceful assembly and association, and access to information.
 - b. General legal and judicial system and related mechanisms affecting for instance charitable status provisions, CSO legislation and taxation, or whether CSOs, or their constituencies, can seek legal recourse.
 - c. Administrative factors affecting the way in which a given government deals with CSOs.

- **Promotion of CSO Voice:** Processes, structures and mechanisms creating access, space, and capacity, for CSOs to formulate, articulate and convey opinion in consultations and decision making processes nationally and internationally.
- **Promotion of CSO Capacity:**
 - a. Funding mechanisms that ensure that CSO capacity is promoted.
 - b. Regulations and norms to promote CSO transparency and accountability to their constituencies.
 - c. Government and other support programmes for developing CSO capacity and effectiveness.
 - d. Measures to promote philanthropy and corporate social responsibility.
- **CSO External Relationships:** Whether CSOs are allowed and enabled to engage in the following relations with other civil society actors:
 - a. North / South relations
 - b. International networking
 - c. National CSO networks and platforms
- **Role of External Partners and Actors in Promoting CSO Development Effectiveness:**
 - a. Northern and International CSOs
 - b. Donors
 - c. Multilateral Institutions

Governments, as the primary regulators and leading national development actors are primarily responsible for most of these conditions, especially those relating to the regulatory framework which conditions the activity and visibility of CSOs as well as the safety of their staff and volunteers. Donors also have an essential role to play in developing an enabling environment for CSO development effectiveness. They do so through the openness that they themselves demonstrate towards CSOs, through their efforts to encourage involvement of CSOs in policy dialogue, and by virtue of the terms and conditions that they impose on CSO recipients. CSOs have identified a number of donor reforms in aid practices and architecture that would enhance CSO development effectiveness (Tomlinson, 2006). Some of these are:

- **Respecting CSOs as development actors in their own right** and their autonomy, even when it might be inconsistent with donor and government priorities, through consistently promoting democratic ownership.
- **Prioritising responsive funding** for CSO-driven programming priorities fostering CSO diversity and autonomy.
- **Assuring long-term funding** for institutional strengthening of CSOs, including CSO-determined capacity building activities, networking and coalition building, and policy development and promotion.

- **Limiting competition for resources** and confining divisive funding mechanisms that encourage competition among CSOs (such as calls for proposals). Donors should give priority to long-term core financial support for broad institutional partnerships with CSOs where possible.
- **Engaging with CSOs in dialogue** on poverty reduction strategies and priorities. In the Accra Agenda for Action, developing country governments made a clear commitment to engage with CSOs (see AAA, §13a).
- **Holding governments to account.** Providing support for CSOs to act as watchdogs to hold their governments to account for policies affecting poverty and marginalisation as well as supporting democracy building efforts by CSOs enabling their primary constituents to claim their rights.
- **Operational relationships** need to be reviewed and simplified with a focus on long-term core and programmatic funding, requirements for accountability, reporting and evaluation.
- **Investing more human and financial resources** to deepen the engagement with civil society, notably through multiplying efforts to reach out to smaller local and grassroots organisations.

CSOs themselves also play a part in fostering good donorship practices as donors, recipients and as channels of aid funds. Northern CSOs are likely to be engaged as aid actors in all three ways. Southern CSOs are more likely to be recipients, although, in some contexts (for instance in Latin America), Southern CSOs are increasingly becoming donors and channels of aid funds themselves.

Finally, special attention should be given to the enabling environment for CSOs in fragile states or in countries affected by conflict. In these contexts, CSOs may be in particular need of protection and may often be the only vehicles for service delivery, or engaging in peace-building and reconstruction processes.

SOME GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Describe the extent to which the following have hindered or enhanced enabling conditions for CSO development effectiveness, including CSO recognition and voice, in your context:
 - a. legal and regulatory framework
 - b. political and governance factors
 - c. socio-cultural characteristics
 - d. funding conditions
 - e. external partners and actors
2. What are some key minimum standards (for adoption by government, donors and CSOs) for an enabling environment for CSO development effectiveness in your national context?
3. What guidelines should be adopted for implementing these minimum standards?

USEFUL RESOURCES

Advisory Group on Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness, “Issues paper”, September 2007. Available at: <http://www.cso-effectiveness.org/-Advisory-Group-on-Civil-Society-.html>

Advisory Group on Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness, “Synthesis of Findings and Recommendations”, August 2008. Available at: <http://www.cso-effectiveness.org/-Advisory-Group-on-Civil-Society-.html>

Nyasulu, V. A, “A question of Enabling Environment for African Civil Society Organisations (CSOS) within Aid Effectiveness Agenda” presentation at the Lusaka Consultation sponsored by the Advisory Group on Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness, October 2007.

Tomlinson B., “Determinants of Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness: A CCIC Discussion Paper”, Canadian Council for International Co-operation, November 2006. Available at: http://www.ccic.ca/what_we_do/aid_civil_society_e.php#cs_determs

Thindwa, J., “Enabling environment for Civil Society in CDD Projects”, Washington, DC: World Bank, Social Development Family, CDD Learning Module, 2001. Available at: <http://www.worldbank.org/participation/enablingenvironment/EnablingenvironmentCECDD.pdf>