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NORTH / SOUTH CSO RELATIONS – A NORTHERN PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

I'm pleased to be here today to talk about Northern CSO perspectives on aid reform and aid effectiveness. My work with the Canadian Council for International Co-operation is the lens through which I will address the implications of the Paris Declaration for northern civil society. At a personal level, my comments will draw on more than 30 years experience with Canadian international CSOs. As a member of the Management Committee of the Reality of Aid Network, I have been part of sometimes intense debate on issues of aid reform among CSOs, North and South. I will also draw heavily from a CCIC discussion paper on civil society and aid effectiveness which I wrote following a dialogue with CIDA last year on some of these same issues (available in the aid section of the CCIC web site – www.cccic.ca).

NORTHERN CSOs AND THE PARIS DECLARATION

As I was preparing for this presentation, the conference organizers kindly wrote and suggested that I address several questions, which I hope to do. But one question: “Are Northern CSOs ready to apply the principles of the *Paris Declaration* in their relations with Southern CSOs?” Although rather simple, I found it to be quite provocative. The answer, if pressed to give a direct one, I think would be “no”. But not because Northern CSOs inherently reject efforts to improving aid effectiveness, their own included.

In order to stimulate debate on this important question, I'll give three reasons why I think the answer is “no”, then I'll elaborate an alternative framework for looking at roles, principles and challenges for Northern CSOs in North / South aid relationships, and conclude with a few comments on ways to move this agenda forward.

As others have made clear, CSOs have consistently supported recent reform efforts centred on the *Paris Declaration* and its implementation. But the answer with respect to civil society applying the *Paris Declaration* is “no”, because it's the **wrong** question to frame a dialogue about civil society and aid effectiveness. Why?

The first reason has to do with the politics of aid reform. The *Paris Declaration* is highly relevant to donors and partner governments because it is the result of more than a decade of research, discussion among donors, and dialogue with some partner governments on what might constitute good practice in improving aid effectiveness **in the relationship between donors and government**. But civil society, while not entirely excluded, was never seriously considered as

having a role in these development relationships, nor in the principles and commitments of the proposed reforms. Unlike the processes now underway for the Accra High Level Forum, CSOs were not included in any significant way in the politics of negotiating the *Paris Declaration*. As a result any application of the principles of the *Paris Declaration* to North / South CSO relations would be merely coincidental.

Indeed many development CSOs in Canada, have been wary of donor support for program approaches, such as budget support and SWAps. These reforms, CSOs fear, would marginalize the role and place of civil society in development and potentially reduce long-standing donor financial support for CSO contributions to development efforts. In Canada, aid disbursement statistics on the surface confirm these concerns: in the five years up to 2004-05, the proportion of CIDA aid resources managed by Canadian CSOs declined from just under 30% to less than 20%. Clearly budget support and SWAps are more complex, but perceptions matter.

While this first concern certainly affects the politics of CSO engagement with donors' aid reform, it does not necessarily speak to the relevance of the principles of the *Declaration* to improving CSO aid effectiveness. Issues of CSO aid effectiveness matter to Northern CSOs. Several major Northern and global CSO initiatives have addressed issues of CSO accountability and aid effectiveness, understanding that Northern CSOs play an increasingly significant role in international aid architecture. I recently calculated that 10 major international NGOs and Northern-based CSO networks alone worked with more than \$6 billion US in total revenue in 2006, with World Vision International and Oxfam International NGO "families" exceeding \$1 billion US each. Individually and collectively Northern International CSOs are not insignificant aid donors and channels for official assistance.

One might reasonably expect then that reforms that donors are expected to undertake as part of their *Paris Declaration* commitments would be highly relevant. But while not diminishing CSO roles in aid architecture, the second reason I said "no" to this question of relevance, relates to the roles and context for CSOs as donors. I would argue that Northern CSOs are very distinct from official donors in this role as donor, and Southern CSOs, as aid counterparts, are equally distinct from developing country governments. CSOs involved in international cooperation, whether they be NGOs, trade unions, church organizations, women's and gender equality organizations, are first and foremost a highly diverse expression of citizenship. As such, in the North, international civil society organizations are channels for global citizenship, representing the interests of often highly distinct segments of society, with disparate organizational values, mandates and forms of governance. Through their efforts and resource transfers, CSOs form complex webs of relationships with civil society counterparts in the South (I hesitate to use the word, "partnerships"). At their best, these relationships support are direct, working in solidarity with poor and marginalized populations, in advancing gender equality, and in strengthening democratic governance and respect for human rights.

Governments clearly must be supported and strengthened to meet their human rights obligations and responsibilities to all their citizens. The commitments made in the *Paris Declaration* should be judged against these obligations. But actions to counter poverty are inherently political. National political will, strategies and institutional capacities on the part of government are essential, but governments alone (often under the influence of economic and political elites) are insufficient and sometimes constrained by commercial and security interests of the donors

themselves. CSOs are essential to democratic culture. Democratic culture implies respect for human rights principles, encouragement of a plurality of views, particularly those outside the circles of power, action to achieve gender equality, and openness to policy and development alternatives.

In this context, CSOs form an essential component of democratic culture in both the South and the North. The Advisory Group on CSO and Aid Effectiveness is consequently working with the important assumption that CSOs should not be understood narrowly as instruments of aid delivery, but rather as development actors in their own right. This implies an inherent right for CSOs to make their own choices about whether and how to relate to donors, the state and private sector actors. Southern CSOs should be able to make the important decision to challenge existing power relations in society, in global institutions, and in North / South CSO relations. This freedom to choose the nature of their development relationships is, in my view, an essential ingredient of CSO aid effectiveness, but one that is highly contentious.

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. The principles and enabling conditions that govern CSO aid effectiveness and North / South CSO relations must be consistent with expanding their democratic roles as development actors and representatives of interests of people, particularly those whose rights are often ignored in society and in global policy dialogue. Some of these principles for CSO effectiveness are likely to be distinct from those found in the *Paris Declaration*, particularly, I would argue, those related to alignment with government policies and donor harmonization.

The third reason that Northern CSOs might be reluctant to collaborate in implementing the *Paris Declaration* is their critique of the limitations of the Declaration. CSOs argue that the operational architecture of aid relationships cannot, and must not, be separated from their actual impact on the conditions for realizing sustainable livelihoods for poor and marginalized people, gender equality, environmental sustainability and human rights.

Women's organizations have argued, for example, that there has been little analysis, in the establishment of the commitments and targets for the *Paris Declaration*, about how the modalities directly impact issues of women's social and economic empowerment. As several CSO speakers have already stressed today, the key principle of local ownership, is undermined as the *Declaration* does address the power of donors to influence development outcomes through imposed conditionalities and policy benchmarks. CSOs, whether North or South, might be more encouraged to promote alignment with the *Paris Declaration* if there was stronger evidence of real participatory processes, which would include poor and marginalized peoples, in assessing the impact of aid modalities in making progress towards social and economic rights.

It is equally important for the largest sector specific northern CSOs to take care not to use their access to large pools of funding to create parallel delivery systems for social services. Opportunities exist for increased coordination with regional and local governments on programs that seek to direct benefits to the poorest segments of communities. But uncritical Northern CSO alignment with donor / national government plans will inevitably result in the reduction of space

for the expression of diverse and critical voices within local civil society. Many Northern CSOs have developed long term financial and solidarity relationships in support of capacity of local CSOs to challenge both their government and donors in their country.

So if the question of implementing the Paris Declaration is not the right one, how might we frame aid effectiveness issues and principles for Northern CSOs? I suggest that we need to start with two: “What specific challenges in the roles of CSOs shape the aid effectiveness of Northern civil society in North / South relationships?” and “How do these principles, relate, or not, to those set out in the *Paris Declaration*?” I will spend my remaining time on these questions.

ROLES, PRINCIPLES AND CHALLENGES FOR NORTHERN CIVIL SOCIETY IN NORTH / SOUTH AID RELATIONSHIPS

The first point to stress again is that Northern CSOs reflect widely differing organizational values, objectives, sectors, organizational structures, interests and resources. This makes generalization difficult. But I would suggest that the link between CSOs and democratic governance point to a rights-based approach as the organizing framework for assessing the effectiveness of Northern CSOs in North / South CSO relationships. In the words of CCIC’s *Code of Ethics*’ “Partnership Principles”, North / South civil society partnerships “should be vehicles for long term accompaniment that support the right of peoples to determine and carry out activities that further their own development options, through their civil society organizations” (CCIC’s Code of Ethics and supporting materials is available on CCIC’s web site under organizational change at www.ccic.ca).

In the CCIC discussion paper mentioned earlier, I identified a few key roles that are highly relevant for the accompaniment of Southern CSOs by Northern CSOs:

1. Relationships of solidarity with southern organizations and movements working with organizations of poor and marginalized citizens;
2. Advancing gender equality, focusing on the rights of poor and marginalized women;
3. Supporting democratic governance and expanding space for citizens’ voices (for both women and men) in policy dialogue, at all levels, but particularly strengthening direct channels for southern voices;
4. Stimulating innovative approaches to development that are grounded in the realities of poor people’s lives and work;
5. Mobilizing and leveraging Northern financial and human resources to support sustainable development; and
6. Mobilizing global citizenship in the North on global justice issues through linkages between citizens in the North and the South.

Clearly there are significant challenges in both the capacity and the commitment of Northern CSOs to change organizational behaviour in relation to these roles, which we need to discuss. Southern civil society, when consulted, consistently point to the profound imbalance in power in

favour of the North in their CSO and donor relationships. Most would acknowledge the value-added of North / South CSO relationships, while questioning the capacities and the will of Northern CSOs to ensure that the potential inherent in these roles are met. The rules relating to the transfer of money and the deployment of capacity are critically important.

What then are some of the key challenges for Northern CSOs? I'll highlight just three.

1. Limitations of Northern CSO Project Modalities

While some Northern CSO goals can be realized through individual projects, for Southern CSOs the project is just one aspect of their work. In a recent study sponsored by the Norwegian Development Network, a Tanzanian CSO representative noted that “Northern NGOs had started to become more prescriptive about focus of work and areas of operation from the 1990s, with more focus on quick demonstrable results and an insistence that their Tanzanian partners link with the government’s approach.” In the selectivity of their project work, Northern CSOs have enormous influence over agendas, who gets money, and who has the final say about who gets to define “success” and “results”.

At the same time, we all know that Southern CSOs will be most effective if they can build their work iteratively, rooted in the logic of their relationships with domestic constituencies. As they strengthen their institutional capacities, many Southern CSOs seek access to core programmatic financing from Northern CSOs and for a common approach to funding from their various donors. We need to look at the barriers for Northern CSOs to respond to such requests for core support. Is our results-oriented funding culture in the North, for example, driving Northern and Southern organizations to demonstrate quick project success stories, while avoiding the messy realities of challenging operating environments on the ground? Are public fundraising CSO imperatives, approaches and messages in the North driving the project modality?

A related concern that can compound the challenge of effectiveness and constituency-building for Southern CSOs has been the “internationalization” of the presence of the largest and most powerful northern NGO. These Northern NGOs seek to expand and “domesticate” their “NGO brand” in developing country markets through local offices.

It’s instructive that the Ford Foundation recently published a manual for Northern NGOs called *So You are Thinking of Moving South – What you need to know and ask*. While clearly the largest international NGOs bring with them advantages of resources, knowledge and scale, such moves can sometimes stunt or undermine the autonomous growth of local Southern CSOs.

2. Strengthening Southern CSO Capacities

Many Northern CSOs, along with official donors, place considerable emphasis on “institution-building” in the South, which is understood as an essential precondition for sustainability. But to what degree are the priorities for CSO strengthening in the South driven by Northern interests and priorities? Capacity building in Northern project-management requirements, for example, seldom takes account of the very difficult operational environments for CSOs in the South. Let me quote once more a Tanzanian from the Norwegian study: “People are living in very different

worlds.” The assumption can be that Northern CSOs have relevant abilities and capacities purely because they are based the North and that organizations and CSO staff in the South must be “taught”. The notion of solidarity implies a sharing of experience that should define the goals in capacity strengthening in North / South CSO relationships.

3. Insensitivity to Southern CSO Interests, Voice and Knowledge in Policy Dialogue

Southern CSOs are often confronted by priorities and policy messages already established by their Northern counterparts. The expectation, with limited consultation, is that all will join in promoting the messages with Northern governments, at international fora, and with their own governments in the South. A long-standing challenge is one of accountability when a Northern CSO claims to represent Southern policy interests. An important advancement in this area is the “Accountability Charter” recently concluded through CIVICUS and now signed by many CSOs.

In responding to these challenges, clearly local ownership is highly relevant, but as many have suggested today it’s “*democratic ownership*” which is key, not the narrow notion of ownership based on government / donor controlled development plans. Respect for political rights of assembly, participation, and the expression of diverse ideas underlies democratic ownership. North / South CSO relationships will be more effective if they are long term ones with opportunities for knowledge of each others realities, based on trust and respect for diversity. There are others that should guide operational relationships.

Given these principles, how might we work together to improve Northern CSO effectiveness? The first point to make is that Northern and Southern CSOs are not new to these debates and issues. A number of both small and large organizations in the North have undergone significant change in the past 20 years after periods of reflection and consultations with CSO colleagues. CCIC, my own organization, developed considerable practice in implementing its Code of Ethics with its members. The Reality of Aid Network has transformed itself from one largely dominated by Northern CSOs to a Southern-led global network. I just mentioned the work of CIVICUS to develop and implement the Accountability Charter for international NGOs. And major humanitarian CSOs have many years of experience building on their knowledge of best practices in humanitarian assistance through the Sphere Project and similar initiatives.

Nevertheless, many significant challenges remain for addressing the effectiveness of Northern CSOs in North / South relationships and, in conclusion, I would suggest three approaches. What characterizes the above-initiatives is that they are all driven by the dynamics of North / South CSO relationships, not notions imposed on CSOs from the outside. Building on this approach, we should work together to:

1. Strengthen substantial CSO-led dialogues between and within CSOs, North and South, to clarify mandates, context-specific needs and capacities, and the value-added of CSOs to development. Operational practices should be reformed, in ways respectful of CSO-relevant principles, so that both aid effectiveness and actions in the interests of poor and vulnerable are enhanced, and that strengthen the diversity of CSO expressions on the ground. Approaches will be different and no one model will be appropriate.

2. Place greater attention on support to Southern CSO-led coalitions. North / South CSO networks are effective where they have *jointly* formulated shared goals and messages for policy and campaigning initiatives. It will not be easy, nor perhaps useful, to judge the effectiveness of individual CSO or even country-specific CSO initiatives. CSO effectiveness may be more relevant on big-picture issues over longer periods of time (for example debt cancellation; democratic accountability; defence of human rights; etc.)
3. Focus official donors and partner governments' efforts on enabling conditions that facilitate effective CSO relationships, rather than artificial alignments with changing government strategies. Official donors are highly influential in the requirements and modalities they choose to fund and promote.

In concluding, let me go back to my “no” to the provocative question about CSO implementation of the *Paris Declaration* principles by adding that a tremendous opportunity exists, over the next year, to work together, as donors, partner governments and CSOs. Together we can build a shared commitment to supporting the strategic roles of CSOs as development actors in their own right, both North and South. Together we can ensure that CSO continue to contribute to innovative development action and democratic accountability. CSO expectations for the Accra High Level Forum and its Action Agenda are high. Through the Advisory Group, we hope to establish some broad principles, enabling conditions and “best practices” in areas of work for improving aid effectiveness. And there will be, for all of us, implications for change. I look forward to our discussions here at this conference and to contributing to that change.