

Is there a relationship between domestic resource mobilisation and civic space?

Faced with political and funding pressures in many parts of the world, civil society organisations (CSOs) are seeking to diversify their funding and strengthen their local support base. Initiatives such as the Change the Game Academy enable this to happen.

But does this domestic resource mobilisation by CSOs have any impact on civic space? Does it improve the environment for civil society?

This brief summarises findings of a scoping study by the Civic Engagement Alliance and INTRAC.



WHY DID WE DO THIS STUDY?

Within the Civic Engagement Alliance, CSOs' and civic groups' capacities to raise funds within their own countries are strengthened, helping them improve their organisational sustainability. This is done through the Change the Game Academy, a training programme initiated by Wilde Ganzen Foundation together with several Southern partners.

The organisational sustainability of CSOs has become increasingly critical as civil society all over the world has come under growing pressure from repressive legislation. CSOs that received a significant proportion of their resourcing from external sources (such as international organisations and donor projects) have also faced a reduction in funding.

Against this backdrop, domestic resource mobilisation offers the potential to address multiple challenges facing CSOs related to accountability, legitimacy, credibility and dependency. A powerful idea behind the growing interest in domestic resource mobilisation is the following: if CSOs can mobilise more support locally, then their legitimacy in the eyes of local populations, duty-bearers and power-holders will be increased. They will therefore be better placed to advocate on behalf of citizens and to hold those with power to account. This should have a positive effect on civic space.

But what is the evidence to back up these assumptions? Taking advantage of new data from a review of the Change the Game Academy conducted between October and December 2018, the Civic Engagement Alliance and INTRAC undertook a light-touch scoping study between January and March 2019.

Our overarching question was:

What is the evidence that generating resources and support from domestic sources expands the space for CSOs to advocate for citizens' rights?

Our objectives were to examine the evidence base, identify gaps in the evidence, and to propose practical ways forward to fill those gaps.

KEY TERMS

Domestic resources: material and non-material support generated within the country at local or national levels. Includes: information, money, assets, reputation, status, authority, legitimacy and expertise.

Civil society: "a dense network of voluntary associations and citizens organisations that help to sustain community relations in a way that generates trust and cooperation between citizens and a high level of civic engagement and participation" (Newton, 2001: 201)*. It includes formal and informal organisations, social movements, interest groups, online discussion groups, coalitions and networks, professional associations, faith-based and community-based organisations.

Civic space: the place that civil society occupies within society, the operating environment and relationship with stakeholders including the state, private sector and the general public.

METHODS

Review of evidence published in academic and non-academic literature on civil society and domestic resources from 1999-2019.

Analysis of primary data from a review of the Change the Game Academy in 2018.

Telephone interviews with review consultants in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia and India.

*Newton, K. (2001). *Trust, social capital, civil society, and democracy. International Political Science Review*, 22(2), 201-214.

KEY FINDINGS

We conducted a desk-based review of literature, exploring academic databases and non-academic materials published by organisations working in this field. Our focus was on literature that presented evidence. Materials were only included for analysis if they contained empirical evidence and related to civil society in the Global South, domestic resource mobilisation and aspects of civic space.

We also revisited primary data from a review of the Change the Game Academy conducted between October and December 2018, including case studies from four countries: Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya and India. Interviews with consultants from the UK, Burkina Faso, India and Ethiopia further enriched the study.

We came up with five major findings from this scoping study:

DOMESTIC RESOURCE MOBILISATION INCREASES DOWNWARDS ACCOUNTABILITY

Domestic resource mobilisation, including through encouraging volunteerism and individual giving, encourages CSOs to become more responsive to the needs of intended beneficiaries. This downwards accountability builds social capacity and also increases trust and a sense of ownership among community members. Evidence from both the primary data and literature implies that CSOs that mobilise domestic resources deepen their ties at the local level, which in turn enhances their accountability and legitimacy.

In Burkina Faso and Ethiopia, for example, the legitimacy and credibility of CSOs in the eyes of beneficiaries have improved significantly because of the involvement of community members and organisations in agenda setting, project design and implementation. This finding from the primary data reflects evidence from Mexico, Ghana, Vietnam, Democratic Republic of Congo, the Philippines and China which indicated that generating support locally enables organisations to focus on issues that matter to beneficiaries, reducing the perception that they are driven by the demands of external donors.

However, our study identified a challenge for organisations working on issues that are not widely supported by local communities, such as LGBTI issues. Fear of political reprisal or a perception that CSOs are controlled by local power-holders or commercial actors can also undermine legitimacy and trust.

IMPROVED RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE STATE AND PRIVATE SECTOR

Shifts in the funding environment are resulting in CSOs generating support from a diverse range of sources, including the general public, businesses, government, public institutions, philanthropists, commercial actors and entrepreneurial activities. The primary evidence from the four countries reviewed for this study showed that CSOs were capitalising on new relationships with local government and the private sector. This translated into additional resources, such as funding for women farmers in India, bursaries for beneficiaries in Kenya, and access to land for CSO buildings in Burkina Faso.

CSOs can also use relationships with government and private sector actors to leverage support and influence, as evidence from South Africa, Ghana, Brazil, China and India demonstrates. We saw that relationships resulted in an increase in trust and support for CSO activities, which also provided opportunities for CSOs to raise awareness.

OPENING SPACES FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

CSOs are using domestic resource mobilisation to create spaces and platforms for dialogue on citizens' rights and to promote civic activism. Empirical evidence from Kenya, India and Ethiopia showed that through consistent engagement with the grassroots, CSOs were strengthening citizens' abilities to demand accountability and transparency from government officials. The wider literature suggested that CSOs in receipt of government funding from a range of countries engage in 'soft' advocacy, using subtle and non-confrontational tactics to lobby their causes through insider relationships.

KEY FINDINGS

“At some point the local government is more receptive towards CSOs that mobilise domestic resources because the government can hold them accountable as they are mobilising resources from their local communities. Once they understand the activities undertaken by the CSOs, they are receptive... So definitely, government is more engaged with CSOs that mobilise local resources.” (National consultant #1, 6 February 2019, Ethiopia)

“As long as you do not challenge the power structure at the local level, you’re okay. But the moment you challenge the local level power structure, then whether you mobilise resources locally or internationally, you will be challenged too... So, it’s not the source of funding but the kind of work that you do that determines whether political actors are receptive or not.” (National consultant #2, 12 February 2019, India)

POLITICAL ACTORS SEEM MORE RECEPTIVE TO CSOS WITH LOCAL SUPPORT BUT IT DEPENDS ON WHAT THEY DO AND THE CONTEXT

The evidence from the primary data gathered for the Change the Game Academy review suggests that political actors are more receptive towards CSOs with a local support base than to those that depend on external funding. However, the evidence base on this issue is weak and needs to be developed further. What we are able to observe from this study is that receptivity is context-specific and depends on the functions performed by CSOs within their political environment at a given time. Political contexts also change quite rapidly, and the evidence often lags behind political developments.

In more aid-dependent countries, the evidence suggests high levels of receptivity towards CSOs that perform service delivery functions in line with government policy priorities irrespective of funding source (external or local). The primary evidence from Ethiopia and Burkina Faso showed that political actors were receptive towards CSOs that mobilised domestic resources because of their perceived accountability, legitimacy and responsiveness to the priorities of the grassroots, as well as their perceived contribution towards national development plans.

Evidence from countries such as India, Venezuela, Russia, Tanzania and Nepal indicates lower receptivity for CSOs that focus on advocacy and human rights, even if they have a local support base. This is because their activities are often considered to challenge existing power structures, and thereby undermine national interests and sovereignty.

There was limited evidence differentiating the receptivity of political actors towards CSOs with or without a local support base.

RISK OF MISSION DRIFT, CO-OPTATION AND ALTERNATIVE DEPENDENCY

The study identified a major challenge for CSOs turning to domestic resource mobilisation, however. Generating resources locally from government, private funders or the commercial sector can have unintended and negative effects on the legitimacy and credibility of CSOs by creating alternative dependencies (i.e. where they shift from dependency on external aid to dependency on other funders or clients). CSOs may prioritise their organisational survival over speaking out on citizen rights for fear of losing funding. Over-reliance, particularly on government, corporate and commercial funding sources, can result in mission drift, with CSOs responding to government or corporate interests to the detriment of beneficiaries, and focusing on service delivery functions rather than advocacy-based activities. Mobilising resources from the general public also has the potential to make CSOs lose their autonomy as they become accountable to rich elites or powerful actors within their communities.

As a consequence, CSOs can be perceived as co-opted and lacking in autonomy. This challenge is well-evidenced in the literature, coming up in studies from many different countries and contexts, including Burundi, Ukraine, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan and Georgia. As we see here, this situation offers a direct contrast to the more positive situation described above and so the evidences offers a very mixed picture .



FURTHER INFORMATION

The full report is available [here](#)

Read Vice Versa special issue on *Shift the Power* [here](#)

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CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this scoping study suggest there is an indirect relationship between domestic resource mobilisation and civic space. Based on evidence in available literature and primary data from four country studies we find that the mobilisation of domestic resource enhances CSOs' credibility and legitimacy by making them responsive to the needs of their intended beneficiaries. In addition, it helps in improving relationships between CSOs, government officials, and businesses. CSOs use domestic resource mobilisation as a platform for raising awareness and educating citizens on their rights which helps them in turn to demand accountability from government officials. Political actors, including government officials, appeared to be receptive towards CSOs with a local support base.

However, the mobilisation of domestic resources from state or private sector actors also has the potential of limiting CSO legitimacy and credibility if they begin to align themselves too closely with them; and if political actors use new relationships to co-opt and silence CSOs. The study findings therefore suggest that despite its benefits, domestic resource mobilisation could also pose a threat to civic space. This implies that CSOs need to be extremely knowledgeable about the political context in which they operate, and be able to weigh up the political risks against the opportunities that come from generating domestic support.

This scoping exercise sought to unpack the complexities of the research question we posed at the outset. There are many challenges in the concepts we are using – what do we mean by legitimacy and credibility and how would we measure them, for example – and many variables that affect the links between domestic resource mobilisation and civic space. As a first step, this scoping study allowed us to identify existing evidence and some evidence gaps, as a way of suggesting actions going forward.

FILLING THE GAPS

RESEARCH

Conduct comparative research on whether government officials are more receptive to CSOs that raise resources locally than to CSOs that do not, and examine the factors that affect receptiveness in different contexts. This was the most significant gap in the evidence base uncovered by our study.

Conduct research with a group of CSOs who are actively engaged in domestic resource mobilisation over a period of time to examine how they engage with and champion citizens/communities on the one hand, and how they engage with government on the other hand. Do the actions and impacts of CSOs change in positive or negative ways relative to civic space as their capacity for domestic resource mobilisation grows?

DIRECT SUPPORT

More practically, provide support to CSOs to navigate the difficult trade-offs and balances that can come with domestic resource mobilisation. This should also help civil society supporters to gain a greater understanding of how domestic resource mobilisation affects CSO legitimacy and credibility.