

Building sustainability of civil society

**Debates, challenges and
moving forward**

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1. Introduction

Between October and December 2014, INTRAC convened an important debate around civil society sustainability. Key issues were brought to the fore through a workshop, webinar and [blog series](#). These provided space for organisations that INTRAC works closely with to reflect and share their experience on the topic. This short paper captures highlights from these activities.

2. Background: Why civil society sustainability?

There have been significant changes in civil society dynamics in recent years. For example, reductions in traditional forms of funding have meant that organisations are seeking alternative sources of income. Yet overcoming dependency on external sources is a challenge that many local organisations are struggling with.

As Rania Masri from [American University Beirut](#) highlighted, in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), finding sustainable funds locally is a challenge. While in Latin America, state funding has become a means of survival for many organisations, as Anabel Cruz of the [Institute for Communication and Development \(ICD\)](#) in Uruguay demonstrated.

“Governments are becoming more repressive and restrictive” Bhekinkosi Moyo, Southern Africa Trust

“In Central Asia the role of NGOs is under attack from left and right, above and below” Charles Buxton, INTRAC Central Asia

Framing this is a context where the roles, functions and forms of CSOs are positively recognised yet also under pressure. As the statements from Charlie Buxton and Bhekinkosi Moyo above and INTRAC’s work on [civil society space](#), show, there are new opportunities for civil society in some places but space is becoming more limited in many contexts, such as Ethiopia and Latin America.

With this in mind, questions we explored through debates include:

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| What is happening? | •What is the challenge that national CSOs are facing in different contexts in relation to sustainability? |
| What are people doing about it? | •What different approaches and strategies are actors (CSOs and INGOs) implementing? What can we learn from these? |
| What does a sustainable CSO look like? | •What elements or dimensions, beyond resourcing, may be important to think about when looking at the issue of CSO sustainability? What might a sustainable CSO sector look like in different contexts without aid investment? |
| What could funders/INGOs do to address sustainability better and differently in the future? | •How can INGOs and civil society support organisations assist CSOs to become more sustainable in the future? How might that change the way civil society is supported now? |

In the following section we tease out what happened in debates relative to the questions.

3. Key debates

a) Taking a holistic view of sustainability

“The sustainable NGO is one that can respond strategically and effectively to handling change”
John Hailey, INTRAC Associate

In our [blog series](#) we outlined different dimensions of sustainability. Legitimacy, resourcing, leadership, mission and values, space and context are all important elements in building the sustainability of civil society. This clearly resonated with many participants who do care about the future of civil society, CSOs, their partners and individuals. The interconnections between these elements came out strongly (see **Box 1** below).



Box 1: SAVI Nigeria’s sustainability tree - exploring the different dimensions

Felix Obanubi of the [State Accountability and Voice Initiative \(SAVI\)](#) Nigeria illustrated his understanding of building sustainability of civil society using the imagery of a tree. The roots represent building operational, financial, institutional and programming sustainability. The strength of the trunk then allows the following fruits to be reaped:

- Transparency
- Legitimacy
- Credibility
- Relevance
- Viability
- Legality
- Accountability

b) Championing the sustainability of INGOs and CSOs versus supporting civic action

“Organisations can die but civil society must live on” Bhekinkosi Moyo, Southern Africa Trust

The distinction between civil society and civil society organisations was reiterated throughout discussions. Should we be championing the sustainability of traditional, aided, professional INGOs and CSOs? Or should we be more concerned with the sustainability of other elements of civil society such as community organisations that have their forms embedded in social structures (and values)? Key points that emerged around supporting civic action included:

- Outsiders can support local civic action by giving them a voice, sharing experiences and/or expertise
- Support needs to be provided to organic movements with care, and not by pushing for formalisation

Concerns were raised around the role of the local CSO versus the INGO and the multiple tensions that exist between the two in different contexts. These are related to perceptions of external INGOs, which emphasise their absence of legitimacy, links to external regimes, their take-over of civil society space, and competition for limited resources.

Against this backdrop of often negative perceptions of INGOs, there is an argument for stronger support for the sustainability of local CSOs and civic action. Reflecting on sustainability in the Middle East and North Africa, Rania Masri from [American University Beirut](#), highlighted that questions are being asked around whose interests INGOs in the region represent, i.e. donors or the community. This also resonated with examples

*“The word civil society has left a bad taste in people’s mouths”
Rania Masri, American University Beirut*

from Southern Africa. Using the example of Lebanon, Rania demonstrated that there has been a huge increase in INGOs, which are crowding out local CSOs, who cannot compete with the higher salaries that the better funded INGOs can offer. Shifting donor priorities and NGOs ‘following the money’ are also issues, as relationships that have been developed with communities are broken when NGOs move on.

During the workshop organisations presented examples of their efforts to overcome some of these challenges and engage with local civic action by mobilising new supporters for development (see **Box 2**).

Box 2: Harnessing the desire to give and give back – approaches to mobilising new support for development

Diaspora giving - Emma Orefuwa from the [African Foundation for Development \(AFFORD\)](#) shared insights into Diaspora giving. Using the SEEDA programme and Young Diaspora Volunteering Missions as examples, she demonstrated that informal giving patterns and direct giving are potential methods of sustaining civil society activity that should be tapped into. Key points for INGOs and NGOs to consider include:

- the multiple identities and generations of the diaspora community;
- the need to be clear on the purpose of engagement;
- and using shared values as a means of creating solidarity between different Diaspora groups.

Giving What We Can - Stephanie Crampin from [Giving What We Can \(GWWC\)](#) highlighted the potential that gaining a substantive commitment from a wide range of people has as model for supporting sustainable civil society. Members pledge a lifetime donation of 10% of their income to the organisation they believe will most effectively improve the lives of people in the developing world. The organisation has a number of recommended charities which the donations will go to. As it has a global health focus, it prioritises support to those working on neglected diseases. There are currently 700 members who pledge a lifetime of giving 10%.

c) Supporting civil society without undermining it

“Too much funding for local organisations creates dependency” Workshop participant

There are numerous examples where the sustainability of civil society has been undermined, such as in response to emergencies where there is a huge influx of external aid, but local CSOs are either swamped or overlooked. There are important lessons to be learnt from these cases, but this also raises a pertinent question about how donors and INGOs can support local civil society without undermining its credibility or inadvertently encouraging dependency.

It is clear that civil society and CSOs need more than funding in order to be sustainable. Key points for how they can be supported without undermining or creating dependency include:

“Aid influx creates issues and problems within national civil society” Workshop participant

- Build on what is already there
- Take time to build trust and long-standing relationships
- Take a long-term vision on what will be left behind (see **Box 3**)
- Build the capacity of national and local organisations to mobilise resources in their own contexts
- Provide funding for institutional capacity building
- Support organisations to be relevant to their local context
- Envisage a post-funding relationship and broker relationships between civil society and CSOs with other local actors
- Provide support through engaging in activities which increase CSO visibility, such as funding short-term capacity addition, engaging with government and private actors, and mutual peer learning
- Facilitate partnership among civil society and between donors as this is critical in terms of coordination, dialogue, and learning

Box 3: Sustainability and exit strategies – examples from the British Red Cross and WWF-UK

The importance of taking a long-term view of what will be left behind came through clearly during discussions. The [British Red Cross](#) and [WWF-UK](#) who are part of an INTRAC facilitated [Action Learning Set on programme exit](#), led a session exploring sustainability as part of the design and execution of exit and transition processes.

Drawing on experiences in Turkmenistan, the **British Red Cross** presented insights around linking exit or transition to partnership principles, policies, capacity building and tools. **WWF-UK** shared their experiences of supporting spin-offs (new, independent organisations and entities that grow out of a project or programme initially supported by **WWF-UK**) as part of the exit process. Key discussion points included:

- The need for sustainability to be embedded in thinking at the start of a relationship and reviewed throughout
- The power dynamics of exit, in terms of decision making, responsibilities, and ownership
- How to exit responsibly
- The importance of documenting for learning
- Relationships and partnership beyond funding and programming

d) Managing the tension between scaling up and remaining rooted

As organisations grow and scale up their efforts, disconnections emerge between themselves and the citizens on the ground. This raises questions around their relevance to local contexts, who they are accountable to, and how best to mobilise resources to achieve change whilst maintaining roots and local connections. **Box 4** gives two examples of approaches to mobilising civic energy and developing a local resource base.

Relative to this, it is clear that organisations should not exist for their own purpose. Instead they should be accountable, legitimate, relevant and add value to the contexts in which they work. They should stay true to their own mission rather than following donor policies. This is counter to the tendency in the sector for organisations to keep going indefinitely.



One viewpoint came from George McLaughlin from the [UK's Department for International Development \(DfID\)](#), who acknowledged that in the past NGOs may have been created to address an issue, whereas now causes may be championed in other ways, such as through informal movements, social media, social enterprise, or forms that have a broad supporter base such as the Church and trade unions. Such local support has the potential to build the relevance of CSOs, is important for remaining rooted and can contribute to sustainability.

Box 4: Supporting local resource mobilisation

Community foundations and philanthropy – Jenny Hodgson from the [Global Fund for Community Foundations](#) shared insights into sustainability from the perspective of community foundations, which are independent, locally led grant making institutions, that foster a culture of local giving. These provide a way in to communities for larger donors without swamping small groups. Bhekinkosi Moyo from the [Southern Africa Trust](#) also highlighted that community foundations need to be grounded in trust, solidarity, legitimacy, and accountability to communities. It is important to think about the interconnectedness between horizontal and vertical links of internal and external actors in the context. However, it is also important to recognise the potential risks of upscaling and losing connection to roots.

Sustainability through building local fundraising capacity - Robert Wiggers from [Wild Geese Foundation](#) shared the steps taken to support national and local fundraising through its Action for Children programme. Together with its national partners, it has trained some 700 community-based organisations to raise community funding of 50%. The national partners, after being trained themselves, support the other 50%. Key success factors for a community fundraising approach include: the ability to adapt to the context; enabling local communities to define their own priorities; and careful selection of national partners. He also introduced the new Change the Game Academy, a programme that will provide e-learning courses on local fundraising and claim making worldwide.

e) Using entrepreneurialism for going beyond service delivery

Civil society, CSOs and INGOs are looking well beyond traditional aid funding. As part of the workshop and webinar, different models and approaches to supporting a sustainable civil society were explored. The examples we worked with included social enterprise, social entrepreneurship and social franchising (see **Box 5**).

Some reflections that emerged in relation to these models and approaches included:

- Alternative and innovative routes to funding and delivering services, such as social franchising and social entrepreneurship, have a valuable role to play and could be good, basic models for specific types of relatively low risk, standardised delivery activities, for example in healthcare, education and agriculture. However, this requires discipline.
- These alternatives are not a panacea and do not work for all aspects of development. For example, they may have limited applicability for advocacy CSOs. Questions also exist around how well these models and approaches would work in contexts of severe poverty, conflict or repression.
- Overall much can be learnt from the systems and processes that they use, and the way in which they engage with local communities and individuals.

f) Ensuring sustainability of the 'messy stuff'

There is a tension between combining a rights-based approach and service delivery, and holding governments to account. For example, in supporting private sector engagement in service delivery as a new model for civil society resource mobilisation, such as social franchising and enterprise (see point 3e), are we prioritising the privatisation of services and encouraging a free market solution?

Another draw-back to combining a rights-based approach and service delivery is that rights advocacy could be neglected, as it cannot be commercialised or privatised. Anabel Cruz of the [Institute for Communication and Development \(ICD\)](#) in Uruguay

Box 5: 'A different model to address the same problem' - examples of alternative approaches

Social enterprise - Michael Norton from the [Centre for Innovation In Voluntary Action \(CIVA\)](#) highlighted social enterprise as a model for achieving social impact and reducing dependency. In this model, the principles and values of businesses and social organisations are brought together. Key elements of success include the individual as a social entrepreneur, which matters more than the idea itself in many cases. A key message was that social enterprise is not one model, but should be part of a mixture of initiatives.

Social entrepreneurship - Caroline Guyot from [Ashoka](#) showed how social entrepreneurship is distinct from social enterprise as a model for supporting sustainability of civil society. The social entrepreneur starts with an idea, develops it and mobilises resources for it to grow. This requires that they find innovative ways to overcome the sustainability challenge and adopt a model that helps them achieve systemic change and social impact.

Social franchising - Martha Paren from the [International Centre for Social Franchising \(ICSF\)](#) shared insights on social franchising as a model of replication and how these can contribute to civil society sustainability. She drew on two examples, Basic Needs and PSI Familia in Tanzania, to show how social franchising can strengthen local systems and organisations, incur less financial risk and increase financial sustainability by drawing on local and national funding. The franchising model works best with some degree of competition and exclusivity for franchisers.

highlighted that in Latin America financial sustainability is a problem for civil society due to the reduction and reorientation of international aid flows. As such, organisations working on service delivery are now funded by the government, which relies on NGOs for the implementation of social policies. While depending on government funding may be eroding their autonomy, exploring other forms of funding is a challenge. However, there are possible solutions, which include diversifying funding to continue independence, exploring new forms such as crowdfunding, merging of like-minded organisations, and building a national constituency to support advocacy for funding and financial sustainability.

Sustainability of civil society is most acute in contexts where relations with the state are strained. In a session with contributions from Getinet Assefa from the [Civil Society Support Programme \(CSSP\)](#) in Ethiopia, Pippa Heylings from [Fundacion Futuro Latino Americano \(FFLA\)](#), and Katja Rosenstock from [Save the Children](#), participants captured multiple levels relative to sustainability; looking at key entry points.

At the local level, it is important that organisations are clear about their purpose and values in order to be free of the taint of ‘foreign’ money and agendas. At the national level, organisations need to be able to engage with elite perceptions and drivers relative to political dynamics and external agendas. At the global level, it is about engaging with international values, standards and declarations, and spaces for learning across national and local contexts.

Box 6: Creating dialogue

Katja Rosenstock introduced a guide developed by [Save the Children](#) to respond to the increasing number of restrictions imposed on civil society, particularly those focusing on rights and governance, around the world. She shared lessons from a campaign spearheaded by the NGO group in a country where the government was looking to restrict the operations of NGOs. Save the Children supported the campaign by, not leading, but mobilising and technically supporting child rights organisations through the national Child Rights Network and its national members. Through reaching out to parliamentarians who already knew the organisations – thus building on existing networks, relations and experiences in the remote areas- the NGO group-campaign contributed to the rejection of the proposed legislative amendments.

[CSSP](#) in Ethiopia is a pooled funding mechanism involving aid from Ireland, UK, Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, Canada and Denmark. Getinet Assefa gave insights from CSSP, such as strategies used to engage in a constructive way with the government and to build the capacity of national and local CSOs to act as a legitimate and trusted interface between citizens and the state. These strategies include investing in capacity development of individuals and organisations in Ethiopian society through four types of grant in order to support and demonstrate the effectiveness, legitimacy and value of civil society in contributing to national development and poverty reduction. In a politically charged environment where the roles and operational space for civil society are defined and interpreted against ideological backdrops, effectiveness can be better facilitated using key principles in civil society work. Such principles promote civil society innovation and creativity, prioritisation of issues of hard to reach people through participatory local decision making, building on peoples’ assets and capabilities, rather than spending too much effort in mere discourses about problems, pursuing social equality to ensure inclusion of, and benefits to marginalised people, building trust between stakeholders to bring about positive change and achieving best value for resources – not just money – for hard to reach women, girls, boys and men.

Pippa Heylings drew on examples from [FFLA](#), a Latin-American NGO that focuses on dialogue and national resource governance for sustainable development, to demonstrate the evolving role for civil society in Latin America. In the context of Latin American “21st century socialism”, governments have strengthened the role of the state, have limited freedom of expression, and have challenged the role of CSOs/NGOs and their claim to represent local populations. Pippa highlighted activities aimed at strengthening the institutional and financial sustainability of local and regionally-based NGOs that support vulnerable groups, as well as their relations with the state.

g) Making CSOs flexible, future-facing and adaptable

"We are moving to interesting and difficult times" John Hailey, INTRAC Associate

In a future dominated by complex development priorities and multiple new actors, CSOs need to be flexible and adaptable if they are to remain relevant and accountable to those they support or the societies to which they belong. They need to try to avoid becoming too rigid in their structures, resource-bases, their relationships and links. **Box 7** gives examples of how different organisations have tackled this.

"There is a need for new alliances and relationships in the NGO sector, between coalitions and networks within and outside of it" - Charles Buxton, INTRAC Central Asia Office

Leaders who are mindful of change, and have the capacity to forge relations, may be crucial to making CSOs adaptable and future-facing. In supporting the sustainability of their organisations, they need to think of the future as well as day-to-day management, and should create space for learning, sharing, coaching and mentoring.

Box 7: 'Future proofing' - ensuring sustainability through flexibility and adaptation

Felix Obanubi from the [State Accountability and Voice Initiative \(SAVI\) Nigeria](#) presented two case studies in which the organisation facilitated partnerships and collaboration between civil society, media and legislature on advocacy for disability and climate change policies in Lagos state, Nigeria. This collaborative approach, though painstaking and time consuming, supported the passing of the disability bill and its possible replication in surrounding states. The case studies presented by SAVI reemphasised that networks and brokering relationships between civil society and other interested partners is an approach that has the potential to sustain civil society. SAVI's work also demonstrated the need for more effective relationships, which is challenging in reality.

The [International Step by Step Association \(ISSA\)](#) is a network that connects professionals and non-profit organisations working in early childhood development. Liana Ghent presented ISSA's experiences in supporting the sustainability of its 60 members and the association, including pursuing growth to avoid stagnation, moving from relying on one major donor to diverse sources of funding, and expanding membership. Key points of interest included: have a clear vision for your organisation and what you want to achieve; have a listening project when working with members; have visionary leadership; and enact change with gentle firmness.

[Afrikids](#) is a partnership between a single UK organisation and single Ghanaian children/young people's rights organisation. In relation to civil society sustainability, Felix Wood showed how Afrikids is adopting a hybrid model, beyond business, looking at impact and quality of programmes, best practice governance and operation's, financial security and managerial autonomy. The organisational aim is to make the UK Afrikids redundant and make their Ghanaian counterparts sustainable after pull-out. The aim is not to shut down but to make Afrikids UK unnecessary. To be sustainable in the long term, Afrikids needs to be resilient, best in class, locally managed and driven. Some of the challenges include available skills and retention of staff, funding and the limited infrastructure for doing vibrant business.

4. Moving forward: Conclusions and recommendations

This report has provided a snapshot of debates in relation to civil society sustainability, which are resonating across many organisations, practitioners, funder and thinkers. In section 2 we outlined the key questions explored during the workshop, webinar and blog series, and running through this report are suggestions for what funders and INGOs could do to address sustainability better and differently in the future. Below are three take home messages that we feel really stood out, which were reiterated by speakers and facilitators in the final sessions of the workshop and their own subsequent reflections:

a) Future-proof NGOs/CSOs

- Develop their capacity to adapt and cope with change, develop relationships, and ensure that resources are used effectively and creatively to meet their mission

b) Learn from alternative funding models and approaches

- Although they do not work for all aspects of development, a lot can be learnt from alternative models. Pay attention to the systems and processes they use and the way they engage with local communities and individuals.

c) Be prepared to step back

- If you are no longer accountable, legitimate and relevant to those that you report to serve, then recognise that it may be time to move on and be prepared to step back.



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