

UK Government support for civil society in 2015 and beyond

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“The daily struggles of millions of civil society groups across the world provide a useful reminder that mass action on the basis of human community may yet generate the foundation for alternative forms of democracy and a new kind of society”¹

This paper provides a complement to Bond’s submission to DFID on DFID’s future relationship with UK civil society organisations. It takes a broader perspective on civil society support, looking beyond UK-based civil society.

Why fund civil society?

Civil society is central to DFID’s vision of achieving inclusive development and open societies.

In a world where inequality is increasing, civil society organisations (CSOs) play a key role in defending and supporting the poor, marginalised and disenfranchised; creating space for their voices to be heard, enabling collective action by them or on their behalf, and influencing government and others to be more responsive to their needs. In situations of fragility and conflict, CSOs are often the main and immediate provider of protection and services and can reach across divisions to build the possibility of a common future. At their best they can inspire and mobilise people from all sectors and walks of life to work together to find solutions to development challenges.

Recognition of the importance of civil society in development has grown over the years. Yet in the current period the role of CSOs is increasingly contested and proscribed even as technology opens up new avenues for civil society action and organising. In this context, DFID, with its global reputation as a leader in international development, can play a unique role in defending the contribution of an independent civil society to development. To do this DFID should:

1. Retain support for an independent, articulate civil society as a cornerstone of UK development cooperation and as a vital element in achieving inclusive economic development and open societies.
2. Contribute to the development of a more international vision of the value and role of civil society, and to influencing Southern governments to recognise the importance of civil society to inclusive development.
3. Start supporting civil society now to become more resilient to a future without aid.
4. Provide a mix of funding windows, particularly in the global South, that respond to the needs of a changing, diverse Southern civil society.
5. Encourage new forms of collaboration between northern and southern CSOs.

¹ Edwards, Michael (2009) *Civil Society* (Second Edition), Cambridge: Polity Press, p.125

1. Civil society as a cornerstone of UK cooperation

The primary importance of economic growth in development is regaining prominence among many donors. With this has come new emphasis on the role of the private sector and, in some countries, a blurring of aid with the promotion of strategic trade interests. Against this background and in the context of pressure on aid budgets, civil society support has been particularly vulnerable to changes in the political nature and policies of different governments.

The use of the inclusive societies' agenda is a positive way to position civil society within the economic agenda but the new department needs to find ways to strengthen the perception across DFID of the central role of civil society in achieving inclusive growth. Some donors have found the development of a civil society policy a useful strategy in promoting a commitment to civil society internally and in protecting it from political changes.

How could DFID contribute?

- Identify what instruments could be most effective in protecting a strong commitment to civil society support as part of UK cooperation, and help DFID's external allies to know how best to support these efforts.

2. A new international vision of the value of civil society

As geopolitical power shifts, one of the challenges for civil society is that the global system is no longer dominated by western liberal democracies who are convinced of the value of civil society and of universal human rights. Powerful players such as China and Russia have little interest in civil society and have a vision of development which is primarily economic. Many developing country governments remain both sceptical of the contribution of civil society to their own agendas for development and wary of forms of aided civil society as possible channels of interference from other powers or interests.

A much richer and more diverse understanding of what civil society is in different contexts and cultures is required. Unless it is possible to articulate a more internationally supported idea of the value of civil society organising and action, it will not be possible to defend it.

How could DFID contribute?

- Give a platform to non-western thinkers and support a new generation of civil society practitioners to articulate a more international vision of the value of civil society.
- Encourage new aid donors who are potentially more sympathetic, such as India and Brazil, to take a more active position globally in support and defence of civil society.
- Use bilateral programmes and other funding mechanisms to try and influence governments to recognise the value of engaging and collaborating with civil society. Expand on the role of civil society in inclusion as a useful starting point, and make greater use of the example of the UK's own experience and ways of working with civil society.

3. Civil society sustainability and resilience into the future²

An unintended consequence of aid investment in civil society is that it has often created highly dependent organisations. These become vulnerable to charges over their legitimacy, particularly if they engage in advocacy work that is critical of government. Investment in civil society action as part of a governance agenda needs to be tempered with reflection about how different forms of funding and accountability impact on legitimacy or may expose civil society to more risk in the future.

In many parts of the world official aid has withdrawn and this is likely to increase. In some middle income countries there is a nascent local philanthropic sector and more private sector giving but this tends to be welfarist in orientation. CSOs who are involved in more challenging areas of advocacy and rights find it difficult to draw in funding to sustain their work.

In countries where international support for development remains significant there is an urgent need to start preparing CSOs now for a future without aid. All actors should be encouraged to include sustainability of civil society as a stronger focus within their programmes. Without this, development and democratic gains made in the last decade may be lost.

How could DFID contribute?

- Support national level dialogues of civil society on the sustainability and legitimacy of the sector in their own countries into the future exploring how funding *now* could help civil society become more resilient in the *future*.
- Support the documenting of different practices of civil society sustainability and exploration of their opportunities and challenges including: examples of social entrepreneurship; working with government funding; engaging with the philanthropic sector and public fundraising; use of endowment funds.
- Fund long-term capacity building support for national civil society in resource mobilisation strategies. This should be part of all multi-donor funds to support civil society.
- Fund further research and learning in emerging economies and MICS on the effect of aid withdrawal on civil society.

4. Funding opportunities in the global South

Most donors are decentralising funding in a desire to reach southern civil society more directly. Although collectively a high proportion of funding continues to be channelled through their domestic CSOs, this appears to be decreasing relative to support to CSOs in country.³

This shift in funding is appropriate given the strength of civil society in many countries and offers more direct channels for donors to support a vibrant and diverse civil society and for linking different aspects of their programming. The following considerations will be important to structuring funding effectively:

² For further reading see <http://www.intrac.org/pages/en/civil-society-in-transition.html>

³ In 2009, DAC members provided around five times more aid to their domestic CSOs than to those based in developing countries; in 2011 this was reduced to just twice as much (INTRAC 2013, '[Support to Civil Society: Emerging Evaluation Lessons](#)', OECD/DAC Evaluation Insight 8).

a) Working with others – ensuring a diversity of funding options

Civil society is an ecosystem that needs a diversity of initiatives in order to flourish. Donors need to look at civil society development at a national level in a holistic manner, seeing not only their own contribution but how their collective and cross-sectoral efforts may be impacting on civil society action and organising.

DFID has played a lead role in developing funding mechanisms for supporting civil society in country, through specific DFID programmes but in particular through multi-donor funds (MDFs). MDFs can allow donors to make a significant contribution to civil society development, but in practice they have a mixed record in terms of how effective they are, depending on their design and implementation.⁴ There is currently a risk that MDFs become overly tied to donor preoccupations and thematic interests. This needs to be tempered by mechanisms for more demand-led concerns to emerge from civil society itself.⁵

b) Balancing results and a space for creativity and innovation – managing not minimising risk

Lessons emerging from recent research and evaluations clearly and repeatedly point to the negative impact that an overly mechanistic focus on measurable results can have. While recognising the pressure for ‘demonstrable’ results, the energy and resources invested in upward accountability to donors should not come at the expense of the flexibility required to reach a more diverse set of civil society actors, and enable them to develop their own pathways to effectiveness in their specific context.⁶

Funding mechanisms can help to spot and nurture new actors. To do this, however, donors need to create windows within their funding mechanisms with looser requirements and where they are prepared to accept a higher level of political and financial risk. Such ‘venture capital’ approaches might look more like models of investment for small business or for ‘start-ups’.

c) Supporting civil society organising as well as organisations

In reaching out to a more diverse set of civil society actors, it is important that funding does not automatically push them into a process of formalisation and then support them on a trajectory of becoming ‘an organisation. Many ‘so called’ civil society organisations are hardly that except in name. They may have few paid personnel, and often expand and then contract and lie dormant according to the availability of resources.⁷ Others, such as culturally traditional organisations or popular movements, may have their own ways of operating and may not wish to ‘NGO-ise’. There is a need to think of new ways to support civil society organising and social action at the grassroots without expecting that all expressions of that will become formalised and permanent.

The emergence of new forms of civic organising made possible by technology also suggests the need for new approaches. These forms of organising rely on the connection of individuals to a common movement rather than their participation through traditional organisations. They also may involve alliances that are more fluid in nature existing for short periods for specific actions.

⁴ INTRAC (2014), [‘Study on Support to Civil Society through Multi Donor Funds: Final Report’](#); Danida (n.d.) [‘Multi-donor funds in support of Civil Society: A Guidance Note for Danish Missions’](#); Fagligt Fokus, ‘Multi-donor funds for civil society in the South: Learning and dilemmas for Danish CSOs and their partners’, Discussion paper.

⁵ These require new approaches to M&E that can track better the impact of funding on civil society outcomes e.g. post funding studies looking at the trajectory of development of organisations that were supported and/or the sustainability of social action at a local level.

⁶ INTRAC (2013) ‘Support to Civil Society: Emerging Evaluation Lessons’, OECD/DAC Evaluation Insight 8.

⁷ Dichter, Thomas & Keith Aulick (2013), CAP Learning Agenda on Local Capacity Development Country Report #7-Tanzania.USAID: <http://www.developmentcapacity.org/>

It is not clear, however, if these new more technologically based spaces and connections are in all or even in the majority of cases inclusive of really poor and marginalised communities. It is also unclear how far they are able to sustain or achieve lasting change for which an interface with organisations may still be important. Donors need to remain sensitive to the interplay of different forms of civic organising, making support accessible to the diverse range of what is emerging.

d) Rethinking capacity development

As emphasis shifts more strongly to the importance of strengthening and developing national level civil societies, capacity development has returned to prominence. Yet those supporting civil society are still falling short of delivering capacity development effectively. Capacity development support is often focused on 'donor compliance'.⁸ This covers the basics of organisational systems and procedures. Yet, there are other aspects of capacity that may be as or more important in the development of effective civil society organisations, such as leadership, integrity, passion, and the ability to genuinely engage and be accountable to poor and marginalised people.⁹ At the same time many organisations lack the basic infrastructure and human resources to integrate the type of support they are being offered.

The quality of the capacity development support sector in different countries is very variable. There are often problems with the quality of provision and methodologies being used, or access to new thinking and international best practice. Investment in the national level capacity development support sector is crucial to making capacity development more contextually appropriate and effective, yet has received little attention from donors in recent years.

How could DFID contribute?

- Encourage more spaces for donors to jointly analyse the opportunities and constraints of civil society development, as well as overlaps and gaps in their funding to address these.
- Offer a mix of funding modalities to support different aspects of civil society, such as:
 - Funding strong national organisations more directly (i.e. not through intermediaries), and work seriously with them on strategies for long-term sustainability
 - Using strategic funding to support the development of organisations in the mid-tier who show potential and can make a step change in their strength and capacity
 - Providing smaller grants windows for emerging organisations and through which ideas and themes from the grassroots can bubble up
 - Using a 'venture capital' approach to fund a wide spread of individuals, organisations and initiatives; target those with most potential for further investment and mentoring to expand their reach and impact
 - Developing new ways to support non-formalised civil society action and organising by supporting shared resources and an infrastructure for social action
- Support long-term research at a local level on how civil society is changing and the impact of different forms of funding on it
- Invest in improving the approach of the sector to capacity development through:
 - investing in programmes to improve quality of the capacity building support sector
 - funding thinking on and pilots of more innovative approaches and supporting the sector to reflect and share learning on practice
 - expanding access to international best practice by funding the development of quality content that can be made more widely available for free through the internet and increasingly through mobile phones

⁸ Ibid

⁹ See R. James blog series at <http://www.intrac.org/blog.php/55/cultivating-character-in-capacity-building>

5. New relationships between northern and southern CSOs

The wider Bond consultation provides thinking on the role of UK and INGOs into the future. One of the challenges is to support organisations to go beyond the rhetoric around the shift in their relationships, including greater leadership from the south, to actually putting this into practice. This requires new ways of organising existing relationships, as well as engaging with alternative forms of partnership and supporting learning and connections globally.

a) Encouraging new forms of partnership

DFID already supports work with diaspora organisations; it also funds research and academic partnerships. It should continue to identify and research new forms of civil society partnership between north and south that may be sustainable into the future. This includes links between professional bodies and associations, or between specific common interest groups, e.g. lawyers-to-lawyers, doctors-to-doctors, disabled people's organisations-to-disabled people's organisations. Because of a shared professional knowledge or common agenda, such horizontal links could offer a way of seeing poverty and responses to it as a global concern rather than through the prism of a north-south divide.

b) Supporting spaces for learning and exchange

Many northern NGOs see a future for themselves as knowledge hubs. Learning and producing knowledge about what works or does not work is fundamental to the ability of CSOs to develop and adapt. However, organisations still struggle to know how to support learning effectively both within their own organisations and between practitioners globally. Technology holds out the opportunity for more global conversations and exchanges but remains challenging to work in practice. Lessons that emerge from learning can often seem repetitive. Part of this is recognising that some aspects of learning are about passing accumulated expertise to new generations of people working in or with civil society. Yet there is also a need to be better at identifying, capturing and using the relatively fewer nuggets of genuinely new learning.

a) Regional and global networking

There has been a strong emphasis within many civil society organisations on focusing on national level change and action. This has led to a decline in investment in cross-border and south-south networking. DFID should revisit how it supports dialogue across national boundaries.

How could DFID contribute?

- Use innovation funds to incentivise northern NGOs to support new forms of relationship with southern organisations, in particular looking at reversing who leads and how the money is managed.
- Engage with and fund research to look at alternative forms of partnership that are developing between north and south.
- Fund discussion and exploration of how to make online learning platforms more effective as a way of connecting people across boundaries.