

Supporting sustainable civil society organisations: rethinking funder policy and practice

Thursday 30th June 2016 (Stockholm, Sweden)

Issues arising and next steps, August 2016

Summary of the seminar

On 30th June 2016, around 40 people participated in this seminar on civil society sustainability, representing: government agencies in Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands; international NGOs; civil society networks; and academic and research institutes.

The seminar was organised by INTRAC, and coincided with the 12th conference of the [International Society for Third Sector Research \(ISTR\)](#), which included panels on civil society sustainability, civil society resourcing, and political and operating space for civil society. The seminar built on discussions between INTRAC, Plan Sweden and Sida about the importance of finding effective ways to strengthen local civil society organisations and new social movements in response to the changing international development context. It came at a time when the UN Human Rights Council was debating a resolution on [protecting space for civil society](#), shortly after the release of the [2016 State of Civil Society report](#) from CIVICUS, and as preparations accelerate for the next forum of the [Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation](#).

The seminar created a space for sharing knowledge and building collaborative relationships. The two-hour session was able to begin conversations and raise important issues that we hope participants will build into their work, whether they are engaged in policy, practice or research.

Unpacking civil society sustainability

All the above initiatives emphasise the central role that civil society – in formal and informal forms – is expected to play in the achievement of development, stability and peace. To do this, civil society organisations need to be able to function effectively and independently. A growing body of work, much of it grounded in practice, points to challenges CSOs need to address for their long-term viability and effectiveness. We capture this under the concept of ‘sustainability’.

Different combinations of factors related to sustainability affect different types of civil society in different parts of the world. There are factors which are internal to organisations (for example related to purpose, mission, leadership, and resourcing), as well as factors which are connected to the immediate external environment and to the wider context (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Key elements of a sustainable civil society

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Two issues explored in the workshop stand out at the present time as having a particular impact on civil society sustainability:

➤ **Patterns of funding and options for resource diversification**

Anabel Cruz from ICD Uruguay opened the discussion by observing that funding flows for development in theory are increasing overall, but there are many contradictions which are having huge effects on CSOs that have long received a large proportion of their funding from external actors. Issues brought out in discussion included:

- high proportion of CSO funding aimed at operations, not core costs;
- contract-style relationships with government that can undermine the political role of CSOs;
- emerging evidence that human rights and advocacy groups are struggling, yet often the divide between advocacy and service delivery roles is not clear-cut and more awareness is required of the impact of shifting missions;
- taking responsibility for sustainability when funding is reduced, and becoming more aware of what happens next to former partners;
- donor desire to direct more support (not just funding) to local and diverse civil society actors, but thought needs to go into how to relate to them and how to develop appropriate mechanisms that support security and sustainability of civil society actors and their actions in ways that are also sensitive to political context.

➤ **Legislative and regulatory frameworks, and the operating environment for civil society**

Mark Sidel from the University of Wisconsin-Madison opened discussions by highlighting that shrinking civic space is a major issue affecting many types of organisations across the whole world, but restrictions take many forms. Spaces are opening also as others contract. More knowledge is required about impacts on the ground in different contexts. Issues brought out in discussion included:

- recognising tools that are being used (often under the radar) to help navigate challenging contexts; we need to bring to the fore practical examples and evidence of how organisations can adapt and respond
- understanding the impact of aid withdrawal on the political leverage that donors have to champion civil society space
- supporting diversity and political space *within* civil society

These issues are closely connected with the credibility, legitimacy and relevance of organisations. Research suggests that the credibility of formal, professional, foreign-funded NGOs is particularly being questioned. This is also affecting international CSOs in countries where they operate. Discussions touched on the new power dynamics that NGOs have to engage with, interaction with multiple stakeholders, and the need to balance sustainability with expectations of results.

Learn more

In other sessions at the conference in Stockholm and in other forums many issues touched on in the seminar have been debated and unpacked further. This includes studies from different geographic contexts, on specific issues like funding restrictions, on paradoxes of the aid system undermining sustainability, and recommendations for improving practice and policy.

We encourage participants to read the following resources, and explore materials produced by the scholars who have provided links to their work in Annex 1:

- [‘Civil society sustainability’](#), Special Issue of *Development in Practice* (including free access articles)

- [INTRAC materials on sustainability](#)
- [WACSI materials on sustainability in West Africa](#)
- Series of short essays on [space and sustainability on OpenDemocracy](#)

What next?

INTRAC believes that all those who support civil society – donor institutions, governments, private funders, international NGOs, and scholars – have critical roles to play in ensuring that the formal and informal civil society actors they support can take ownership of their own sustainability. We have to grasp the opportunity now to rethink how we support civil society differently going forward.

Some of the ideas proposed at the seminar include:

Policy-makers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Address the lack of coherence across policy areas that undermines the many donor policies that are in place to promote a pluralistic and diverse civil society. ➤ Review expectations of results across different departments/programmes that fund civil society and whether these are compatible with support that promotes sustainability, and with the actual work that civil society organisations are doing. ➤ Attune funding mechanisms (and accountability tools) to the aim of supporting diverse civil society actors, recognising different short-term and long-term needs. ➤ Track and share funding data. ➤ Look at the impact of aid withdrawal from particular countries/context on your capacity for policy leverage in those contexts.
Practitioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Pose questions internally about real power dynamics, legitimacy and accountability, and how local actors are supported. ➤ Change methods of working with partners to tackle sustainability. Engage more with the dynamics of the civil society ecosystem in areas where partners work. ➤ Share examples of ways in which organisations are navigating political and operating space, including how organisations are diversifying their resourcing. ➤ Engage in peer-learning and knowledge networks on sustainability issues and innovations (including those which are convened by academic societies such as the ISTR).
Researchers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Engage in knowledge networks, such as on aid reduction in policy and practice. ➤ Explore funding tools, mechanisms and patterns relative to sustainability. ➤ Research different types of civil society and processes of organising to help with talking about and responding to dynamics within the internal life of civil society. ➤ Collate and analyse examples of organisations that demonstrate sustainability, including small organisations. ➤ Conduct more research on roles played by governments in strengthening civil society. ➤ Examine gaps between policy and practice assumptions around civil society space and sustainability. ➤ Conduct research on the impacts of aid reduction on local civil society.

There are some specific steps that policy-makers, practitioners and scholars could address now:

1. Develop stronger exit strategies that focus on sustainability

- Many donors, INGOs and local NGOs have weak exit strategies in place. Poor exit and transition planning is a major issue creating sustainability problems not just of organisations but also the wider sector.
- INTRAC is working with different partners to make good practice, case studies and tools available. This includes promoting a new Knowledge Network on aid withdrawal being developed by the University of Kennesaw.

2. Invest in capacity building for sustainability

- INTRAC is working with different partners to develop better approaches to supporting organisational sustainability.
- We encourage INGOs to make partners aware of support that exists. One such initiative is the Change the Game Academy.

3. Ensure that research and knowledge on sustainability is accessible

- There is often a gap between research and practice
- Make academic research on sustainability accessible to practitioners and policy-makers through promotion of open-access materials and alternative forms of dissemination
- Make time for knowledge-sharing activities

4. Share case studies and examples

- Existing knowledge is often not shared widely.
- Make case studies and examples available of organisations that have adapted (successfully or unsuccessfully) to a changing environment.

If you want to take forward any of the issues raised in this paper in collaboration with participants at the seminar, please get in touch with Rachel Hayman at INTRAC: rhayman@intrac.org

Annex 1: Information on scholars working on sustainability

Susan Appe, Assistant Professor, Binghamton University, Binghamton, New York, USA;
Affiliated Researcher at Universidad Andina Simon Bolivar, Quito, Ecuador. Email:
sappe@binghamton.edu

Susan's research focuses on government-civil society organization (CSO) relations and the characteristics and evolution of organized civil society in both developed and developing countries. She focuses on the shifting political, regulatory, and funding environments for civil society, particularly in Latin America. She welcomes inquiries and collaborations related to the following topics: (1) how and why CSOs form civil society networks and the implications of doing so, (2) shifts in aid architecture and its implications for civil society, (3) CSOs within the framework of sustainable development and the post-2015 agenda, and (4) the role of CSOs in South-South development cooperation.

Website: <https://www.binghamton.edu/public-administration/faculty-staff/appe.html>

James Copestake, Professor of International Development, University of Bath, UK
<http://www.bath.ac.uk/sps/staff/james-copestake/>

Relevant interests: 1) Mechanisms for public financing of development oriented NGOs; 2) Credible and cost-effective development impact evaluation.

On the first see: Copestake, J., O'Riordan, A.-M. and Telford, M., 2016. Justifying development financing of small NGOs: impact evidence, political expedience and the case of the UK Civil Society Challenge Fund. *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, 8 (2), pp. 157-170.
<http://opus.bath.ac.uk/49010/>

On the second see: Work on the QulP (Qualitative Impact Protocol) at
<http://qualitysocialimpact.org/>; and

<http://www.bath.ac.uk/cds/projects-activities/assessing-rural-transformations/index.html> (or go.bath.ac.uk/art)

Anabel Cruz, Director of ICD Uruguay & Regional coordinator of Rendir Cuentas Network
Anabel's main working topics are: CSO transparency and accountability; citizen participation; civic space; open government. Websites (with open access materials): www.lasociedadcivil.org;
www.rendircuentas.org

Christopher Pallas, Assistant Professor of Conflict Management, Department of Political Science and International Affairs Kennesaw State University, USA. Email:
cpallas@kennesaw.edu

Christopher Pallas' research focuses on the relationship between local stakeholders and international actors (donors and INGOs) in the creation of development policy. He is currently engaged in a project on the impact of aid reduction and donor withdrawal on local civil society. A more detailed bio can be found here: <http://psia.hss.kennesaw.edu/faculty-staff/christopher-pallas/>. A complete listing of publications, with links, can be found here: <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=NTW34wcAAAAJ&hl=en&oi=ao>

He is particularly interested in being contacted about aid reduction and donor withdrawal. Recent work in this area include:

Pallas, C. L. (Ed.). (2015). Workshop Proceedings: Impact of Aid Reduction on Local Civil Society in Conflict-Affected States. Washington: US Institute of Peace. Available open access at:
http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=conf_proceedings_ccm

Pallas, C.L. (2016). Aid Reduction and Local Civil Society in Conflict-Affected States: New Research and Stakeholder Dialogue. *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 11(1): 105-109. Available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15423166.2016.1146515>

Marcelo Marchesini da Costa, PhD candidate in Public Administration and Policy from the Nelson A. Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy at the University at Albany, SUNY, USA. Email:

Marcelo's research is focused on nonprofit-government relations and governance in Brazil and other Latin American countries. He has published at *Voluntas*, Clacso Press and Cambridge University Press (forthcoming). His professional experience includes several years working in Brazilian agencies in the areas of health, culture, and social development.

Website: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Marcelo_Marchesini_Da_Costa

Patricia Mendonça, University of São Paulo, Brazil

Patricia's main topic of interest is Civil Society Organizations, with a focus on their relationships and sustainability. She has been also questioning the meaning of the word "Organization" for CSOs, and trying to look more at "processes of organizing", considering non formalized CSOs, groups and social movements. In 2013 she coordinated research about funding advocacy CSOs, and the results in English can be accessed on:

http://ceapg.fgv.br/sites/ceapg.fgv.br/files/u26/livro_articulacaod3_ingles.pdf

Other publications: <http://usp-br.academia.edu/PatriciaMendonca>

Jacqueline Wood, Carleton University, Canada

Jacqueline is part-time Senior Policy Advisor with the multi-stakeholder Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment. The Task Team's (www.taskteamcso.com) Secretariat is housed at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague while its funding comes from Sida. Jacqueline's professional efforts have focused on international norm and standard setting; the promotion of good practice; and monitoring implementation by governments and CSOs of their commitments to the provision of enabling environments for civil society and CSO effectiveness and accountability. Jacqueline is also a PhD candidate at Carleton University in Ottawa. Her research explores the drivers behind the regulation and treatment of civil society in developing countries, with Kenya as a core case study. Relevant publications include: '[Unintended consequences: DAC governments and shrinking space in Kenya](#)', *Development in Practice* 26:5 2016