
Sustaining civic action through respectful partnership and responsible exit: event summary

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February 2018

Introduction

Between Tuesday 14th and Thursday 16th November 2017, over 120 people from all over the world joined a live webinar and online discussion forum examining the politics and practices of support to civil society. This was the first ever Virtual Event as part of CIVICUS International Civil Society Week, organised by INTRAC with the Instituto de Comunicación y Desarrollo (ICD), Peace Direct and Y Care International.

Recognising that many civil society organisations (CSOs) face significant challenges in delivering changes in their communities and holding those with power to account, the event aimed to inspire actors in the global development system to take co-responsibility for ensuring the independence, credibility and sustainability of civil society. We sought to take a fresh look at the relationships between funders, intermediaries and CSOs; to move beyond blame and frustration to encourage fresh thinking and to build collective momentum to find new ways to move forward.

Participants joined from a huge range of countries, including Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Cambodia, India, Nepal, Nigeria, Tanzania, Qatar, Canada, South Africa, Finland, USA, Australia, Brazil, UK, Ireland, Jamaica, Syria, Uruguay and many more. They represented diverse CSOs, international NGOs (INGOs), global institutions, private foundations, networks and research institutions.



Presentations and written contributions came from Cathal Gilbert (CIVICUS Monitor), Jessie Davie (Maliasili Initiatives), Kathy Reich (Ford Foundation), Nicole Léotaud (Caribbean Natural Resources Institute - CANARI), Auli Starck (Kepa), Bridget Moix (Peace Direct), Edna Chilimo and Elias Xavier (Foundation for Civil Society Tanzania), Jenny Hodgson (Global Fund for Community Foundations - GFCF), Jiban Karki (PHASE Nepal), Judith Greenwood (CHS Alliance), Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay (Participatory Research in Asia - PRIA) and Roy Trivedy (United Nations). Many others shared their thoughts, experiences and resources over the three days and since.

Together we reflected on breaking reliance on external funding and what needed to change in traditional patterns, from local organisations pushing back against funding agreements that will weaken their long-term effectiveness, to INGOs taking a long, hard look at their practices, and to funders taking risks with strategic funding.

The context: delivering on the SDGs in the face of closing civic space and declining aid

“Without an open civic space we cannot have responsible partnership because we need a basis, an enabling environment for civil society organisations to partner with other stakeholders and other organisations, governments. That is a responsibility from international organisations, from donors, from networks – how to sustain and how to open that civic space so that fundamental freedoms are respected.” (Anabel Cruz, Director, ICD and Chair, CIVICUS)

The gap between rhetoric and reality in ‘partnership’ has long been an issue within the aid system; it has been debated and analysed over and over, and there are many examples of both good and poor practices from different times and places. Politics and power, too often related to money, continuously seem to hinder the prospects for systems-wide change in attitudes and approaches. This does not mean that this generation, right now, should not strive for a new direction. The times in which we live demand this. As Cathal Gilbert from CIVICUS pointed out, *“no longer can we say that civil society in some parts of the world is facing difficulties and in others it is not. It cuts across the whole world.”*

The presentation from Cathal on the context provided a stark reminder of the challenges that civil society faces all over the world. The real-time CIVICUS Monitor¹ captures both improvements and deteriorations in respect for human rights, freedom of expression, freedom of association, etc. The broad picture at the present time is, in Cathal’s words, *“quite bleak... if you add up the population of all of those countries in the open category, just 3% of the people on the planet live in a country with open civic space.”* The Monitor captures a broad range of violations affecting civic space, including repression against people who are calling for fulfilment of basic rights, such as state benefits for disability, or access to jobs and healthcare.

Contributions from Tanzania and India supported this analysis. In East Africa, Edna Chilimo and Elias Xavier note unclear laws on CSOs, as well as government interference and muzzling of civil society on politically sensitive issues, affect the sustainability of organisations. In India, the *“contemporary story of hope, opportunity and success”* (Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay, PRIA) masks high inequality, limited job creation, and a systematic decay of the institutions of governance and fundamental freedoms. Within this environment there is a rise in ‘uncivil society’, often protected by the state, which contributes to concerted attacks on minorities, self-censorship within the media and attempts to ‘capture’ academic institutions. Foreign funding can exacerbate these problems: *“As governments around the world crack down on civil society one of their main - and easiest - arguments is to question the ‘legitimacy’ of those that receive funding from ‘foreign’ donors. Unless more is done to build local constituencies, supporters, champions - including local donors - civil society will continue to find itself vulnerable to such onslaughts.”* (Jenny Hodgson, Global Funding for Community Foundations).²

At the same time that civic space is being squeezed in different ways, however, the global framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) demands greater collaboration amongst

¹ See: <https://monitor.civicus.org/>

² See also: [Special Issue of Development in Practice on civil society sustainability](#)

different actors, including with the private sector.³ This offers opportunities for CSOs who can contribute in numerous ways: providing technical expertise, delivering services and resources, holding SDG partners accountable to their commitments, facilitating partnerships across sectors for goal implementation and monitoring, reforming organisational practices and systems to increase impact, raising awareness for the SDGs, modelling behaviours and attitudes, and developing skills across goal areas through transfer of knowledge and experience. Opportunities are also offered by the CSO Accountability Charter, the ‘agenda for humanity’ and the ‘grand bargain’ which, as Judith Greenwood from the CHS Alliance observed in her written contribution, *“have all contributed to setting the agenda for a more inclusive and collaborative approach that puts ‘people at the centre’ and looks at new ways of working.”*⁴

We need to overcome the contradictions: restrictions on civil society to receive funds from external public or private partners for rights-related issues, and restrictions on mobilisation of people, limit the capacity of CSOs to contribute towards achieving the SDGs at community and national levels. Reductions in international support to civil society in emerging economies such as India limit the support available to CSOs working on participatory democracy and human rights issues; similarly in South Africa where funding for smaller organisations is limited. But *“civil society continues to be resilient”*, as Cathal Gilbert observed. The *“enormous social capital”* (Edna Chilimo, Foundation for Civil Society, and Elias Xavier, independent consultant) created by civil society and their networks should provide a strong foundation; but it is also one which needs to be nurtured and often revitalised, as Liz Clarke (independent consultant) observed.

To capitalise on those opportunities requires deeper change in how we approach support for civil society.

“Civil society has to be prepared to continue to face a difficult immediate future where populism, a retreat from internationalism, and rising nationalism will be features of our world for some time to come ... but ... civil society continues to be resilient, continues to find ways even in the most closed societies to protest and to find new ways of organising and creating better societies... We see that funders are adapting ... but we wonder if this is happening quickly enough.” (Cathal Gilbert, CIVICUS)

Examining the challenges for civil society sustainability in the aid system

The three main webinar presentations examined how different actors in the aid system view and address relationships, looking at perspectives from local organisations, international organisations, and funders. In her presentation on the experiences of CANARI, Nicole Léotaud emphasized the importance of partnerships which enable small organisations to have a wider reach; and the value of working with a progressive international organisation and other CSOs to explore better approaches to partnership.⁵ CANARI developed principles which it uses to develop

³ R. Trivedy [‘Achieving the SDGs, why it is everyone’s business’](#); [‘Beyond Business as Usual – New and Renewed Partnership for Sustainable Development’](#)

⁴ See also: Global Mentoring Initiative [‘Localisation - the Partner Chronicles’](#)

⁵ CANARI was part of an international initiative led by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED): <https://www.iied.org/supporting-organisations-facing-disruptive-change>

and assess partnerships (see Box 1), including critical questions to ask of each; it has used these to pull out of collaboration negotiations on occasion. Nicole suggested that all organisations should pose themselves the following question: *“Will the value of the gains from the relationship be greater than the transaction costs when assessed over the life of the project?”*

Box 1: CANARI’s Vision for Partnerships

Definition: *“A mutually beneficial collaborative relationship where the southern CSO and the other party (INGO, international agency, donor) collaborate to achieve clearly articulated common goals and each partner equitably contributes to and benefits from the partnership.”*

Key Principles:

1. Shared vision and values
2. Specificity
3. Ownership, equity and trust
4. Effective governance
5. Value added and clear purpose

The catalogue of criticism against funders and intermediaries, including INGOs, that came up in written and spoken interventions from participants from many different countries and contexts was not unexpected. It included:

- Dictation of agendas by those with money and therefore power, crowding out and undermining local voices: *“This agenda that [international agencies] have may actually be in conflict with the voices of southern CSOs and we are drowned out and become powerless because of their influence”* (Nicole Léotaud, CANARI)
- Focus on public service delivery and private sector engagement by corporate funders
- Limited support for core costs or organisational investment
- Too much involvement by INGOs in implementation, detracting ownership from local CSOs
- Rigid systems and practices that can drain CSO capacity
- Lack of transparency of INGOs and bilateral organisations, as well as a lack of knowledge of and trust in local actors
- Competition for resources, particularly when INGOs fundraise locally which competes directly with local organisations: *“There is an ethical issue around the extent to which international NGOs register local versions of themselves, use the systems and the structures that they have as a northern organisation to compete with local organisations who maybe have built long tem constituencies over a period of time who could potentially be transforming them into a local donor base.”* (Jenny Hodgson, Global Fund for Community Foundations)
- INGOs not wanting to ‘do themselves out of a job’
- INGOs seeking out stronger, established partners who are capable of implementing interventions, rather than taking risks with weaker actors who may have potential
- Weak capacity within INGO field offices, where individuals can damage the reputation of INGOs on the ground
- Donors seeking scale by investing larger amounts of money through grant managers; this can exclude smaller, national organisations that end up in competition with larger INGOs and intergovernmental agencies and also perpetuates a focus on accountability to donors
- Insufficient attention to responsible exit and sustainability planning, which throw up problems when INGOs are faced with sudden shocks in aid flows from upwards donors.

Criticism was also levelled at local organisations, with participants highlighting competition amongst CSOs for funding, which limits collaboration, and problems of trust in the governance structures of some CSOs, where corruption can arise from individuals within the aid system using partnerships to benefit personally. Poor governance can be a stumbling block for raising funding, and is particularly problematic where the regulatory framework is weak and guidance on good governance for CSOs is lacking. Contributors from Tanzania condemned the dependency mind-set of many CSOs: *“CSOs have been relying on calls for proposals and foreign donors for many decades. This seems to have made citizens (all classes) to have mind-sets that it is not up to them to fund development initiatives but rather a responsibility of foreign donors!”* (Edna Chilimo, Foundation for Civil Society, and Elias Xavier, independent consultant).

These reflections emphasized the frequent gap between the rhetoric of partnership and the lived reality, begging the question for one contributor of *“what value does the involvement of INGOs add for Southern CSOs and the respective country of operation?”* (Jiban Karki, PHASE Nepal). Tamim Amijee (independent consultant, Tanzania) wondered whether ‘partnership’ needed a conceptual reboot: *“it is evident that there is a clear recognition that ‘partnership’ as it stands at present is a cause for concern ... Perhaps there is a need to understand afresh ‘partnership’ and to determine whether this model is the appropriate model for intervention.”*

Yet, there are INGOs that do appear to be doing things differently. In her presentation, Jessie Davie from Maliasili Initiatives explained how they premise their work with ‘high potential’ African organisations on strengthening their ability to bring about lasting change. Often this requires helping partners to *“get better in the office”*, improving governance, strategies and priorities. Building on findings from recent research, Jessie emphasized the need for more critical thinking on capacity building.⁶ We also heard how Peace Direct, All We Can and the International Tree Foundation are all striving to take a more *“transformational, rather than transactional, approach to partnerships”* (Bridget Moix, Peace Direct) through activities such as helping with mobilising resources for partners, promoting peer-to-peer capacity building, and conducting research into good practice.

From the funder perspective, Kathy Reich from the Ford Foundation introduced the BUILD programme,⁷ which specifically supports the organisational development and sustainability of grantees as part of CSO ecosystems. This programme emerged from strategic reflections at the Ford Foundation, including on the way in which funding in the non-profit sector can result in organisations becoming dependent on short-term funding, and unable to innovate or take risks. As Kathy said: *“the Ford Foundation has come to realise that we have contributed to this problem over the years and decades ... So we made a concerted effort to be part of the solution instead.”*

We explored examples of other civil society funders that are also acting differently. Both the Wilde Ganzen Foundation and the Global Fund for Community Foundations, for example, emphasize the essential role of local resources in building trust, buy-in and local ownership.⁸ Both organisations seek to build up local donor constituencies to complement external funding. As Jenny Hodgson from the GFCF observes, Community Foundations then *“begin to blend traditional “vertical” systems of accountability to external donors with a much more important “horizontal” accountability to people in their communities.”* Esther Meester from the Wilde Ganzen

⁶ See: [‘Designing Healthy Partnerships for African CSOs working in Natural Resource Management and Conservation’](#) (Maliasili and Well Grounded 2017); [‘Strengthening African Civil Society Organizations’](#) (Maliasili and Well Grounded); [‘Partnerships for Building Civil Society: A review of WRI support to east and southern African CSOs 1995 – 2005’](#) (World Resources Institute and Maliasili)

⁷ See: <https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/our-grants/building-institutions-and-networks/>

⁸ See resources from [Change the Game Academy](#), including ‘inspiring stories’

Foundation noted that “CSOs with a local support base are much better placed to make claims towards duty-bearers and advocate for human rights and inclusion.” This point and the connection between civic space, sustainability and accountability was supported by numerous participants from different contexts and in different roles. A further example is USAID’s Local Works initiative, which seems promising in terms of participants driving the process and sustaining results.⁹

Addressing the challenges

Given the geopolitical context, and the problems (many of them persistent) in the aid system, what solutions were proposed? Firstly, there was considerable discussion about domestic and alternative **resource mobilisation** to enhance both the sustainability and accountability of local organisations. Participants observed that fundraising is hard work everywhere, requiring a lot of effort and long-term investment, as well as an enabling environment.¹⁰ Yet, in some places there is a growing middle class and more wealth; and there are traditions of local fundraising across the social classes to build on, which sometimes receive government support, notably for development initiatives. Tanzania and Kenya were cited as such examples:

“I have had experiences where we were able to fundraise from the poorest of the poor. What is needed is just conviction and relevance of the case being presented. I think we (as CSOs) need to ask ourselves; how is it that in third world, religious institutions (churches, mosques) are able to raise massive funds locally and CSOs can’t raise even little resources? ... Why citizens in third world fund celebrations and festivities that are temporary and shy away from funding projects that could be beneficial to them in a sustainable manner?”

(Elias Xavier, independent consultant, Tanzania)

Fundraising for more ‘political’, human rights-related issues was highlighted as being particularly problematic with limited interest from middle classes or private funders, and hostility from governments. This concern came through in interventions from Laos, South Africa, Tanzania and India, leading to a discussion about distinctions between ‘political’ and ‘civic’ activities undertaken by civil society. Cathal Gilbert (CIVICUS) noted that in Ireland and the UK “*the notion of what is ‘political’ is being blurred as the state seeks to control civic groups’ ability to go beyond just service delivery and actually influence the direction of government policy.*”

Nevertheless, even in restricted contexts, there are very often ways that civil society actors, with or without the backing of INGOs or funders, are able to navigate the political spaces, to build relationships and influence policy and government programmes. Skills in advocacy and in working politically are therefore important, enabling civil society actors to find ways, including through service delivery, of maintaining and expanding the fabric of civil society. This point was made by numerous capacity building providers and consultants in the event. Roy Trivedy (UN Resident Coordinator, Papua New Guinea), emphasised the value of small steps: “*in some of the most difficult social, political and cultural contexts, it is often vital for donors to support small,*

⁹ See: <https://www.usaid.gov/partnership-opportunities/ngo/localworks>

¹⁰ New research in this field was put forward by [Emmanuel Kumi on Ghana](#), and [Gioel Gioacchino on Colombia](#).

incremental steps that help to build the foundations for bigger more transformative changes in the future.” In these instances, both the Wilde Ganzen Foundation and CANARI placed value on matched funds and small grants channelled to community groups through southern CSOs, allowing local mobilisation to build on external resources.¹¹

Secondly, we considered what new approaches to **organisational development** were required. Ensuring local organisations are clear about what they want from partnerships was an important starting point mentioned by several capacity building providers. We also stressed the need to expand the availability of high quality local capacity development provision,¹² as well as the enabling more southern-based organisations to act as intermediaries. This resonates strongly with one commitment of the Core Humanitarian Standard, which *“speaks directly to building/reinforcing local capacity, local leadership and this means engaging with CSOs and ensuring that any response is as local as possible and as international as necessary”* (Judith Greenwood, CHS Alliance). We debated which aspects of organisational development are most appropriate. While investment in leaders and leadership was welcomed, a couple of contributors noted the need to avoid focusing on specific individuals to the detriment of building stronger alliances, partnerships and movements.

In addition to a range of general recommendations, including pleas for greater transparency, sharing of risks, and honest conversations to address disconnects and build more equal relationships, there were clear messages for different actors:

For national and local organisations in the ‘global south’

A strong message was the need to build local constituencies in order to connect with citizens and be more accountable to them. As Brian Pratt (independent consultant) emphasised: *“to fail to do this leaves groups more exposed to criticism from antagonistic governments that such work is the result of foreign intervention rather than representing the concerns of the local population.”*

Behind this lies the need for a change in mind-set with regards to funding relationships, reiterated again and again by participants from Tanzania:

“It is high time for the CSOs to begin planning for the kind of projects that are well within their ability rather than planning for projects and depending on resources from elsewhere or from abroad. I think this way we can be in a position where we can maintain freedom and do things that we really want to do.” (Elias Xavier, independent consultant)

“I believe some serious rethink is required. To start with, the notion that CSOs/NGOs ought to receive funding from donors (i.e. external, mostly western agencies and INGOs) has to be firmly squashed. Local CSOs/NGOs in the recipient countries must start out with the notion that they have to mobilise local resources and actually do so.” (Tamim Amijee, independent consultant)

¹¹ Ekta Parishad was offered as an example of an organisation supporting local people to mobilise their own resources to take action <http://www.ektaparishad.com/en-us/about.aspx><http://www.ektaparishad.com/en-us/about.aspx>

¹² See INTRAC's [Consultants for Change](#) programme

Making this shift will require courage to say no: *“We need to lead this process ... We need to be ready to say no to a partnership if it compromises our principles, puts us at risk and does not mean real sharing of power. This may mean declining an offer of resources which is very scary to many CSOs desperate for funding. But when we explain why an offer of partnership is not acceptable we are advocating for a new kind of relationship. And we need to teach others how to be good partners to us. We need to be clear about what we bring to a relationship and what others can bring to us”* (Nicole Léotaud, CANARI).

Finally, there was a call for CSOs to adopt good practice in accountability and governance, using self-regulation where national systems are weak. Examples were given of CANARI using its Board Conflict of Interest Policy, and practices in place in Bangladesh shared by Koenraad van Brabant (Global Mentoring Initiative) where some organisations have developed a Charter of Expectations from international agencies which is complemented by a Charter of Accountabilities.

For international NGOs and intermediary organisations

The list of recommendations for INGOs and international intermediary organisations included suggestions that many will find familiar. In particular there was a call for more **honesty** and **self-reflection**. Such moves could help with encouraging more risk-taking and ultimately more equal relationships. INGOs need to really interrogate the purpose of ‘partnership’ and what capacity building is for. As Tracey Martin (Plan International) observed: *“When INGOs are looking at context, they need to look honestly at their own role in that context and the influence they are having ... It is no good strengthening the capacity of civil society if you are simultaneously starving it of funds ... We need to be mindful about the tensions and honest about the effect we are having - and seek to mitigate any potential harm. Otherwise we are strengthening civil society with one hand and weakening it with the other.”* If INGOs are committed to strengthening civil society, they need to be clear about what they are strengthening civil society for; and what a strong civil society might look like in that context in the short- and the long-term.

Jenny Pearson (independent consultant) called for **consistency of engagement** and **values-driven practice**, recognising that these can easily get lost for multiple reasons within international institutions, between headquarters and country operations. She asked: *“How can INGOs consistently demonstrate, through their actions, that they are driven by values that genuinely hold central the sustainable development of local civil society?”* This relates to calls for better accountability in practice from many participants. To this end, INGOs need to deliver on existing **global commitments** to high standards in partnership in reality, not just in theory, for example commitments in the Grand Bargain, the Charter 4 Change, the Principles of Partnership, the ACFID Code of Good Practice. There are also numerous partnership guides and tools, accountability frameworks, principles and standards to build on.¹³ Jessie Davie (Maliasili Initiatives) proposed that *“We need to see more peer pressure amongst international NGOs, pushing each other to be better partners, talking about their experiences, talking about their failures, talking about where things have worked really well.”*

On a more practical level, INGOs could place more emphasis on sustainability within programme planning and partnership approaches. Participants highlighted the importance of **exit** planning.¹⁴ Recommendations included: planning for sustainability and reduction in dependency on external

¹³ Ideas shared included: [KEPA](#) (Compass for partners); [Keystone Accountability survey](#); [Core Humanitarian Standard](#); CSO Accountability Charter.

¹⁴ Resources on exit: INTRAC: <https://www.intrac.org/projects/aid-withdrawal-exit-strategies/>; Richard Holloway ‘Exit Strategies: [Transitioning from International to Local NGO Leadership](#)’. See also a new research project by Peace Direct, Search for Common Ground on CDA Collaborative Learning Projects on [aid exits and locally-led development](#).

financing from early on; having systems in place to cope with rapid exits (see Box 2); directly involving those who will continue the work subsequently in exit planning; undertaking post-exit assessments to really test impact over the longer term.¹⁵ More INGOs seem to be taking the question of good exit planning more seriously, and it will be important to assess whether this has any impact on shifting dynamics in the system.

BOX 2: Planning for exit

Auli Starck from Kepa observed that one of the most difficult situations for partnership is exit, especially when this has to be done rapidly. This happened with many Finnish CSOs when the aid budget was slashed from 2015-16. She observed, however, that there are ways to do this well. Ideas emerging from the Finnish situation included:

- Protecting the reputation of the partner: Demanding an official letter, signed by the Minister for Development, to assure local authorities, media, other partners and the public that the exit and closure of the project was not because of any malpractice of the local CSO. Organising local, open discussions with different stakeholders. Using proper exit-plans where available and speeding up exit-plans already started or about to start.
- Supporting local CSOs in finding new partners and networks. In the case of INGOs, negotiating with “sister organisations” to transfer the partnership.
- Investing in proper farewell: face to face meetings, farewell parties, time for dialogue.

For funders of civil society

Participants welcomed the move by the Ford Foundation away from rigid deliverables towards a more flexible and predictable approach. This raises questions at the same time about getting the balance right between providing core support and encouraging resource diversification to ensure longer term sustainability. Participants also welcomed the Ford Foundation’s attempts to share its ideas broadly amongst other funders, although there is still much to be done to get funders to move beyond taking an interest to taking action in this area. There were calls for concerted action by INGOs to advocate for a shift in the system of development funding. Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay (PRIA) queried what role can the international development community play to provide funding and political support to local CSOs, while Bridget Moix (Peace Direct) asked: *“How can we engage donors and international decision-makers to transition unhelpful funding structures and systems to ones that are more supportive of local civil society, even when it means negatively impacting our own organisations (i.e. losing funding or reducing our role)?”*

As with INGOs, attention to exit and sustainability planning could open up conversations between actors over competition for resources, the value added of partners, and unexpected harm that some choices can cause. Esther Meester (Wilde Ganzen) wondered whether *“there are more opportunities to connect the dots between international funders and grassroots groups, without harming their legitimacy and keeping focus on building local support?”* This requires a more long-term approach and some commitment to unrestricted or core funding to catalyse diversification.

¹⁵ Valuing Voices' [post-project analysis of evaluations](#) has unearthed some lessons regarding partnerships

Participants called for more funding of the ‘infrastructure’ upon which the civil society ecosystem depends (the regulatory system, regular analysis of funding dynamics, capacity building provision, support for coalitions and networks, learning systems), as well as creative ways to fund local organisations directly. In this respect, expanding the role of southern intermediaries as grant conduits was proposed, on the grounds that they are more embedded in the context with good knowledge of local organisations.¹⁶ Clare Moberly (INTRAC) emphasised the value of making strategic funding available when organisations are at a ‘step-change’ moment in their operations.¹⁷

Time for a ‘collective rethink’ - moving forward

“It is time for INGOs and Bilateral organisations to accept that Southern CSOs have enough expertise and capacity to think about their problems themselves ... Since there is still a long way for the Southern CSOs to be financially independent, there will always be INGOs’ influence if the funding comes through them. Therefore, there is a need to have a mutually agreeable partnership base to minimize this owner/contractor relationship between the INGOs and CSOs.” (Jiban Karki, Phase Nepal)

“No one organisation can solve these massive complicated global challenges on their own, but instead we need collective and collaborative action. We need strong effective partnerships that bring different skills, knowledge and resources together for maximum impact.” (Jessie Davie, Maliasili Initiatives)

“I am calling on everyone to be champions in leading the way to be forging new types of partnerships, and to develop your own partnership vision and principles and to use these as a guide to ensure that your partnerships help you to build strong and sustainable civil societies.” (Nicole Léotaud, CANARI)

Our rich discussion around the politics of partnership, roles of INGOs and funders, resource mobilisation, civil society governance, and capacity development for sustainability, raised many thorny questions. Many of these have been examined over and over again; numerous studies and evaluations of partnership in practice often come to very similar conclusions about good and poor practice. Yet, good practice is clearly not translating into lasting systematic change.

Nevertheless, there is an appetite to attempt to reboot partnerships and make them work. Ours was not the only event in late 2017 to address similar questions;¹⁸ drawing all this energy together gives huge potential for advocacy at local, national and international levels. In the current context of shrinking space for civic action all over the world, solidarity amongst those who genuinely want to make change happen is more important than ever. As Liz Clarke (independent

¹⁶ CANARI policy brief: <http://www.canari.org/wpdm-package/pb23-effective-grant-making-to-csos>

¹⁷ See C. Coventry and C. Moberly (2015) ‘Multi-donor funds for civil society: choices and dilemmas’

¹⁸ This includes an [ICSW event on partnerships](#) coordinated by Partos, a webinar on civil society partnerships organised by IOB in November 2017; a group of European health-focused organisations advocating for more responsible transition in/from emerging economies; and an emerging group looking at [‘direct and democratic resourcing’](#) of civil society.

consultant) emphasized, reflecting on the South African context, *“There is a real opportunity for the INGOs and local CSOs to contribute to the building of social capital and healing of communities.”*

So there is a lot of ‘will’ to change. What we need to concentrate now on is the ‘way’ to make that happen. INTRAC’s perspective is that if local and national civil society organisations are going to be able to deliver real impact then they need much more room for manoeuvre in their contexts; they need to be able to navigate the political context, and they need to be able to respond to opportunities to bring about lasting change. If INGOs and funders are serious about facilitating this lasting change, then they have to question whether their strategies and approaches actually hinder this process and, if so, they have to rethink their practices. This may mean taking a longer-term approach to capacity development for sustainability, taking risks with moving the responsibility for the money so that the power begins to shift, and championing overhauls in the funding system in collaboration with others.

To do this will require some difficult and uncomfortable conversations; it will require careful navigation of the politics at organisational and societal levels. Let us not pretend that these do not exist, but find ways to navigate them. As Tracey Martin (Plan International) proposed: *“Can we use our development practice of understanding the system, working together to change it and encouraging the different actors to come together and think of workable alternatives? And of course talk about and be honest about power?”*

As we head into 2018, we will extend our collaboration with likeminded actors to find ways to take forward the recommendations that emerged from this virtual event, including:

- Encouraging public and private funders to support CSOs in ways that enable them to diversify their resource base and increase their power in relation to partners and government.
- Offering capacity development support so that CSOs and NGOs can make the necessary changes in areas such as: resource mobilisation and diversification; responsible exit planning and post-exit evaluation; mutual accountability in partnerships; governance and strengthening connections with local constituencies; and context analysis and ‘thinking politically’.
- Carrying out research into truly innovative practices to test and build up the evidence base.

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