

Empowerment through Intermediation: Assessing the Role of Civil Society Support Organizations

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I. Introduction

The overarching goal of development is to promote policies, institutions and capacities that strengthen the voice and participation of the poor and the marginalized in improving their socio-economic status through democratic governance in society. In recent years there has been an increasing recognition of the importance of strong civil society, wide-spread citizen participation and empowerment being key to sustainable development and democratic societies. As a result of this, two kinds of tendencies have become more visible in the contemporary development practice.

The first has to do with increased flow of resources to actors of the civil society now. There is recognition of certain long-term, permanent and ongoing role for them in the society. In the previous decades, organized initiatives of the civil society were viewed as transient and temporary in the society.

Second tendency is to find ways to strengthen the capacity of civil society. Therefore, interventions aimed at institutional development and capacity building, which had historically focused on state and public sectors, are now being increasingly aimed at Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).

NGO cooperation has been regarded as a flexible, innovative, cost effective and efficient form of development aid. However, lately NGO cooperation is referred to and valued in terms of support to the development or strengthening of civil society. NGOs are increasingly regarded as potential bearers of democratic values, norms as well as arenas for democratic training. As a considerable part of the development aid is channeled through NGOs it is of growing interest to find out to what degree the NGO cooperation has contributed to the development of civil society. The interest in supporting civil society is an integrated part of over all development strategy, as a vibrant civil society is associated with direct and indirect processes mitigating the development goals. Nonetheless, the discourse accommodate considerable confusion concerning the core meaning of the notion of civil society, and one rarely finds an elaborated explanation on how civil society is to promote the key development goals.

The paper argues that (1) empowerment of citizenry is well facilitated through various forms of intermediation by CSOs; and (2) local *Voluntary Development*

Organizations (VDOs) definitely contribute to the empowerment of citizenry through formation and strengthening of various *citizen collectives or Community Based Organizations (CBOs)* and *strengthening institutions of Local Self Governance (LSG)*; and (3) the effectiveness of VDOs depends on the quality of support provided by the intermediary *Support Organizations (SOs)*.

Indian context offers a complex mosaic of CSOs. VDOs, SOs and various types of CBOs are different subsets of this mosaic. The term SO started to be used in the late 80s, and now has two decades of experience and reflection behind it. SOs are CSOs, an important part of whose mission is to provide capacity building support to other CSOs, which are working at or near the grass roots. The definition agreed by a South Asian Conference of Support Organizations in 1999 is: "intermediary formations with the overall purpose of strengthening the capacities of the grass roots to promote local empowerment while enabling and strengthening base organisations and intermediaries: enabling access to knowledge, capacities, resources and linkages, with advocacy playing a role" (IFCB, 2000).

Empowerment of the poor and marginalized in this paper has been understood as:

- a. *Awareness* of their present reality, the dynamics of their society, their collective interests, the conflicts with others' interests, the value of being organized, the value of their own experience and identity;
- b. *Knowledge* about the process of group formation, the nature of an organization, the rights, duties, responsibilities, obligations of group membership, their rights and responsibilities vis-à-vis the State;
- c. *Skills* in mobilizing and organizing people, planning and implementing collective actions, collecting/processing/disseminating relevant information, and influencing others;
- d. *Actions* which demonstrate self-confidence in engaging with people and events, demonstrate achievements of desired impact through collective actions, and reflections on successes and failures in collective action;

Before we proceed further to understand the capacity building support provided by the SOs and the resulting empowerment at the grassroots, a discussion on Indian CSOs is well within the context.

II. Types of Civil Society Organizations in Indian Context

Civil society can be defined as the *sum of individual and collective initiatives directed towards the pursuit of common public good*. This definition of civil society acknowledges

the presence of individual initiatives in different cultures. Individual action, however limited and small, contributes to the well-being of society as a whole. This definition also points to the varying degrees of collectivization, which may exist in a society. While some collective initiatives are more formally organized, many others remain transient, temporary and informally managed. The concept of public good used in this definition is not a homogenous one and may have multiple interpretations by different groups. It, therefore, implies differences, conflicts and contestations (Tandon and Mohanty, 2002).

There is also a considerable debate on what constitutes civil society. Many civil society classifications have used purpose, activity, nature of organization, its resource base, etc. Tandon (2002) offers a classification of Indian CSOs based on associational processes and purposes. The five types of associations include:

- (1) Traditional Associations which are social units either defined as tribe, ethnicity or caste;
- (2) Religious Associations which are inspired by religion and spirituality;
- (3) Social Movements which include (i) movements to uphold the interest of *particular group* like women, dalit or tribal, (ii) movements to *protest against a set of practices, institutions, policies or programmes* like reforming social evils or rights of women etc. (iii) movements to *protest against displacement or to protect environment* etc., and (iv) movements to *hold governance and state institutions accountable* to the citizens;
- (4) Membership Associations which include (i) *Representational Associations*, primarily set up to represent the opinions and interest of a particular category of citizens like trade unions, peasants organizations or business and traders' associations, (ii) *Professional Associations*, organized around a particular occupation and/or profession like lawyers, teachers, journalists, doctors, nurses, engineers, managers etc. (iii) *Social-Cultural Associations*, promoted for sports and recreational purposes like youth clubs etc., (iv) *Self-help Groups* include neighborhood committees, project induced committees and other citizen groups;
- (5) Intermediary Organizations include CSOs, which serve an intermediary function among individual citizens, and between them and macro State institutions like the bureaucracy, judiciary, legislature, police, etc. Several types of intermediary organizations are active in India today which include (i) *Service Delivery Organizations*, provide basic services to other citizens, (ii) *Mobilizational Organizations*, help organize and empower local communities and marginalized sections to understand and demand their own rights and to take ownership of their own development, (iii) *Support Organizations*, provide support to other CBOs or other intermediary CSOs, (iv) *Philanthropic Organizations*, provide resources to other CSOs, (v) *Advocacy Organizations*, set up with the explicit purpose of advocating on a particular cause like environment, gender, human rights, child labour, local governance etc., (vi) *Network Organizations*, associations

of other intermediaries and act as networks to extend their collective voice and strength.

The present paper specifically examines the contribution of SO to strengthen other intermediary organizations, which in turn are engaged to strengthen other forms of CSOs particularly CBOs towards empowerment goal.

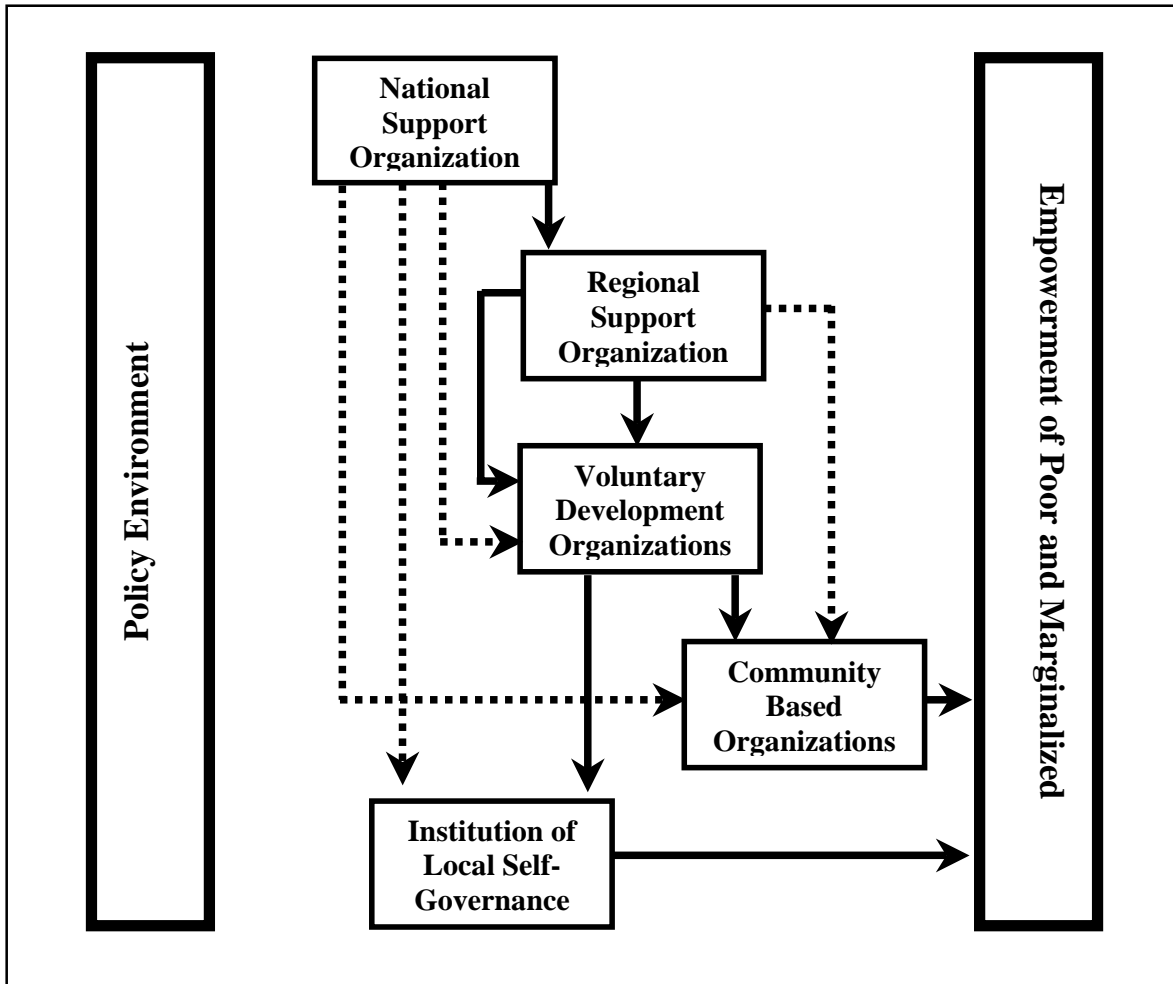
The development discourse on civil society does, however, contain some distinction that have become widely accepted since they have proven quite instrumental in the process of trying to organize the debate. One such distinction is that between the two main functions of civil society; the pluralistic function and the educational function. Even though some authors have ascribed other, or even additional functions to civil society it is a widely held opinion that the pluralistic and educational functions are at the core of what is expected from civil society (Fedrik, 1997). Drawing from democratic theory, the pluralistic function of civil society is to provide the fora where otherwise unheard citizens and groups can organize, formulate and eventually voice their demands on other social spheres such as the State and the market. Upholding its pluralistic function in relation to the State, civil society thus becomes a vehicle to balance and check the actions of the state. The educational function of civil society is to encourage and train the citizens of a community to interact in a way that itself promotes continued and deepened interaction. Civil society is to train citizens “in the art of association” (Tocqueville, 1994).

The debate on the exact definition of civil society and the beneficiary effects of its development is likely to continue within and between the aid community and the development oriented research community. Nonetheless, to be able to formulate and ameliorate their policies, aid agencies have expressed the need to validate some of the fundamental hopes attached to the development of civil society. The objective is to identify the extent to which development support through NGO cooperation have contributed to enhance the capacity of their partners to pursue their operations and to act as democratic fora as well as be a source for a democratic citizenry.

III. A Model of Intermediation

This paper examines the impact of capacity building services provided by a national Indian Support Organization (PRIA) and its regional partners known as Regional Support Organizations (RSOs) (SSK, Samarthan, Unnati, Sahayi, Censored and CYSD) to a variety of VDOs, which in turn facilitates empowerment of CBOs. These SO collectively formed a loose network called National Collaborating Regional Support Organizations (NCRSO). In this model PRIA has not only acted as a SO itself, offering services to local CSOs, but has also acted as a stimulant and supporter of other Indian SOs which have acted at the State (or sub-State) level to offer services to local CSOs. More specifically this paper is an attempt to an assess the model of

National and Regional Support Organisations in India as a means to build effective and sustainable grass roots CSOs that empower the poor and marginalized. The following diagram shows schematically the relationship between different types of CSOs.



- PRIA as a National Support Organization is involved with the policy environment at the national and state levels, provides capacity building services to RSOs, VDOs, CBOs and Institutions of LSG;
- RSOs are also involved with the policy environment (both national and state levels but more at the state level), provide capacity building services to VDOs, CBOs and Institutions of LSG;
- VDOs provide capacity building services to CBOs and Institutions of LSG;
- CBOs and Institutions of LSG empower the poor and marginalized.

However, the scope of the present paper is to discuss the chain of relationship as shown by solid lines in the diagram i.e. NSO → RSO → VDO → CBO → Poor and Marginalized Citizens.

The capacity building supports that the SOs provide to the VDOs, CBOs or Institutions of LSG are premised on the profound understanding of capacity building. This definition of capacity is rooted in the Southern context and takes into account the complexities of development context. Tandon (2002) defined capacity from the vantage point of Southern VDOs as "...the totality of an organized effort of an organization to fulfill its mission". Therefore, the key issue is the elaboration of the identity of the organization. As there are diverse purposes, missions and rationales for starting up and continuation of different VDOs, universal prescriptions of desirable capacity are not relevant. The important thing is to look at capacity in relation to the mission and purpose of the VDO. The experience of Support Organizations suggests that three types of capacities are the most relevant for Southern VDOs (Tandon & Bandyopadhyay, 2003; Bandyopadhyay, 2003).

- A. *Capacity related to Perspective:* The critical component of capacity is related to the perspective, which drives the intellectual and conceptual analysis of the societal context. It is the perspective, which clarifies the vision of a desirable society, analyzes a given social reality, and guides engaging in social action. The uncompromising pursuance of this perspective determines the extent to which a CSO takes up an independent and autonomous position in relation to societal concern. The perspective includes values, ethics, and moral ground, which create the foundation of voluntary social action.
- B. *Capacity related to Institution Building:* Another critical component in capacity is related to institution building. It involves the internal and external relationships and linkages. Each CSO operates in a locally specific context through a network of relationships with other actors, which not only provides the basis for its pursuit of purposes and mission but also provides the basis for its legitimacy. Therefore, the ability of CSOs to nurture, cajole, coax, influence and confront these relationships and actors is a primary arena of capacity.

The capacity of a CSO to manage its internal systems and procedures is crucial to foster and pursue its mission and purposes. In this context, the internal capacity to relate and respond to the external environment and become adaptive and resilient is prerequisite to achieving the developmental goal of the organization. Therefore, enhancing capacity for organizational management and renewal is critical.

- C. *Capacity related to Resource Mobilization and Utilization:* Experience suggests that material resource base is an increasingly important element of capacity as far as local CSOs are concerned. This includes the physical infrastructure and assets and resources. It is this capacity which in fact provides a strong ground for taking an autonomous and independent political position on the issues of contemporary concern.

Following this understanding a multi track approach to capacity building has been practiced by the SOs to enhance the capacities of CSOs. A whole range of tangible and non-tangible inputs are transmitted through this process of intermediation: information dissemination, perspective and awareness building, training inputs, convening of discussion forums, seeding of organizations, crisis hand-holding, encouragement to engage/agitate, sensitising women and encouraging leadership among women, initiating awareness on issues of good governance at the village level, advocacy inputs, vision-mission statements, strategic plans etc. More specifically they include:

- Providing training to staff and members of organizations both individually and in groups;
- Providing technical and managerial advice;
- Supplying consultation/mentoring/guidance;
- Providing funding or introducing VDOs to funding sources;
- Facilitating access to decision makers in public policy arena;
- Building links to other like-minded VDOs;
- Collaborating on advocacy campaigns;
- Collecting, producing, sharing, disseminating information;
- Identifying emerging issues;
- Organising exposure trips;
- “Crisis” hand holding;

The Support Organizations provided capacity building supports with several distinctive expected outputs. They included:

- (i) *Identifying and Implementing Programs:* VDOs, CBOs, LSGIs and other CSOs helped by SOs to have clear ideas about the important factors in the lives of the target group and helped by them to design and implement programs that address these factors and improve their lives;
- (ii) *Organizational Development:* VDOs, CBOs, LSGIs and other CSOs helped by SOs to have clear ideas about the capacities that need to be developed in their own organizations, and helped by them to acquire or strengthen those capacities;
- (iii) *Organisational Sustainability:* VDOs, CBOs, LSGIs and other CSOs helped by SOs to have clear ideas about the capacities that need to be developed to sustain their own organizations, and helped by them to access resources and implement programs that develop organisational sustainability;
- (iv) *Supportive Environment:* A local political and social environment in which the building of sustained and effective CBOs/LSGIs/other forms of CSOs – and the empowerment of the target group through them is supported;
- (v) *Resources:* Finance and other resources effectively provided to VDOs/CBOs/LSGIs/ other CSOs and their expenditure monitored.

IV. The Results of Intermediation

Empowerment is visible at the community level through their enhanced awareness of and participation in the local governance electoral process at the village level, through the growth of community leaders particularly from poor and marginalized sections, through the awareness of their rights and their readiness to stand up against harassment by government officials. One of the most crucial inputs through the intermediation chain is pertaining to prepare the community for participating in the election and functioning of LSGI. Empowerment has been stimulated and this is evidenced by an organized and systematic approach to tackling the *dalit* (untouchability) issue. Besides the actual interventions on the ground, the community is able to act that much more assertively because it feel the moral support of the VDOs all the way back to the SOs. Those defending the “status quo” in dalit issues also are aware that their opponents have ‘powerful backers’. Grassroots leaders had been enabled to a very high degree to form and lead networks of their own. Community level leadership - of both sexes - have been built and the general community is found to be more aware and capable. One of the most important empowerment achievement at the level of the community has been that the communities have become aware of the existing government schemes in poverty alleviation and social development, and, once aware, are able to involve themselves in them. There is also economic improvement in the communities through self-help groups.

Transmitting genuine empowerment to grassroots communities through the process of ‘intermediation’ i.e. using SOs and, through them, local VDOs to reach communities, is an innovative strategy. Using multiple layers of intermediation under a broad capacity development mandate is an effective and cost-efficient way of achieving genuine empowerment at the grassroots. The presence of strong institutions makes for a more effective empowerment strategy and ultimately, community-level impact on poverty. This method works best when a favorable policy environment is in place and needs small, catalytic amounts of investment in monetary terms. The model relies on the presence of effective institutions at critical levels to achieve its objectives and, therefore, needs as much emphasis on building organizations of the people as it does on actual empowerment processes per sé. While the model is cost efficient, it does need high investment in terms of time and qualitative inputs because since both organizations and disempowered communities at the grassroots need protracted periods of hand-holding to be able to move along on the empowerment continuum. There are frequent crises, which need to be managed and equally frequently, difficult challenges occur when empowerment means challenging those defending the status quo. All this makes a time-intensive pattern of intervention requiring long-term goal setting and adherence to mutually agreed strategies. Being untied to issues, the model frequently accomplishes highly desirable tangential spin-offs (e.g. when most of the communities had taken up

education issues with a whole new perspective after receiving capacity building inputs through the intermediation channels).

Empowerment has taken place at incredibly diverse levels, across a range of parameters and is manifested in diverse forms. It has happened through the increased group formation among women and their consequent collective action, it has happened in the form of enhanced social capital – challenging and monitoring the work of corrupt government officials, it has happened in the new-found confidence among *dalit* and other disadvantaged groups, it has happened in the vigorous participation in local level democracy and many other ways. The nature of CBOs created and the language of their discourse – right down to the grass roots – follows a distinct pattern that clearly shows it to have grown out of links with the SOs.

However, the communities, while aware of the value of group actions, and indeed actively practicing them, are still not in a position to manage these on their own. Although empowerment has taken place at a rudimentary level, there is clearly a long way to go for communities to be free of dependence on the VDOs and to be self-sufficient in their approach.

The institutional arrangements of the SO model make for flexibility, a high degree of local ownership, decentralized leadership and cost-effectiveness. The model calls for intermediary organizations that are continually learning, highly adaptive and geared to flexible intervention techniques and global informational resources. There are very few institutional mechanisms, which can deliver the same quality of inputs on a sustained basis at this level of costs.

Being time and quality intensive, the output of the model varies according to the nature of the SO, the personalities involved, the context in which it operates and the time period for which it has been operational. Of these, context seems to be the most important variable. The externalities of donors and the government have a significant impact on the final outcome of intermediation.

However, the intermediation model faces the challenge of scaling up i.e. moving beyond isolated pockets of VDO intervention. There is also the challenge of reducing the importance and size of the flow of money – both actual and expected – in the intermediation channel and keeping the balance favorably tilted towards non-monetary flows. This, in turn, requires frequent learning, unlearning and re-learning at the level of the SOs. SOs also need to be able to successfully draw the line between creating relations of dependency and genuine support. SOs need to be acutely aware of this issue because the intermediation channel is beginning to attract a myriad of consultancies, for-profit firms and other such actors in the development field. Continuous upgrading of the quality of SO services would be the best way for them

to remain relevant. The loose network of SOs, while setting a precedent by itself, also needs to come together more often to revisit and reinforce the key mission and perspectives in order to remain focused on the desirable final outcome.

Some Important Lessons

(a) The importance of sustainable and sustained organizations

It is clear that community level empowerment does take place through intermediation. To have sustained and sustainable community level empowerment, however, requires formal organizations which is possible given the relatively free, democratic space available in India. Formal organizations are necessary when organizing is undertaken with a view to a 'constructive' agenda (like leadership development) as opposed to an 'agitationist' agenda (like opposing a power project or agitating for land rights). The latter form of organization tends to die down with time - either through the meeting of the objectives of the group, or through the gradual onset of indifference.

To lead a sustained agenda of empowerment, therefore, there need to be agents of change at various levels whose job it is to keep the organizing work effective by providing the awareness of empowerment, the skills for empowerment, the knowledge that underpins the empowerment process and catalysing the actions that lead to empowerment. These agents of change are effective and sustainable organizations.

(b) The "Quality" of intermediation

Intermediation itself is a dynamic concept, which is determined by changing external realities. Good quality intermediation is one where temporal and environmental factors have been adequately foreseen and capacities are put in place to that effect. In all assessments of capacity, the 'process' aspect of capacity building needs to be critically examined - as much as the 'impact' aspect. Four parameters stand out to judge the quality of intermediation. These are:

- (i) Change in quality of intermediation over time;
- (ii) Changes in intermediation in response to changes in the immediate and wider environment;
- (iii) Capacities installed in response to anticipated future needs; and
- (iv) Flow of influence in multiple directions - up, down and horizontally - in the intermediation channel and at multiple levels.

(c) *Long-term commitment*

Empowerment is not a fixed goal that can be reached at a certain time. The process of empowerment usually implies facing up to deep-rooted social traditions and relations of power, and so the period of hand-holding and dependence on the outside organization may well need to be long. If it is too short or peremptory, the forces of status quo will be able to grab back the gains. It is important for a VDO be there for the community or for an SO to be there for a VDO at a time of crisis. Crisis hand-holding serves two purposes. Firstly, it builds trust like no other activity can. Secondly, it provides the entry point for a reformist agenda to overturn deep-rooted aspects of the status quo. Many a times SOs are found to have some reserves of their own earned incomes (through consultancies, sale of publications etc.) and were willing to share this with partners at times of crisis. This is tantamount to a positive use of earned resources to address vulnerabilities in partners and signifies a deep commitment to continued engagement and building of meaningful relationships.

The problem with uncritical long-term commitment is that often, it may lead to a shift in stake-holding pattern in which the intermediary organization may become more the driver of operational programs than the community for which it is meant. It is also important to see that hand-holding does not degenerate into a relationship of pure dependency. Perhaps it would be important for SOs to revisit questions relating to the point where hand-holding crosses over onto dependency.

(d) *The high value of information and the role of perspective building*

Communities and community level organizations come out of localized contexts with limited horizons – for example, in their awareness of external realities and in their ability to access resources. To grow into effective instruments of empowerment (ability to generate collective action, raise awareness, influence policy etc.), CBOs need information and comprehension that can only be provided by organizations with a more macro understanding of issues, with broad-based knowledge systems and with access to global informational and technical resources. Information combined with perspective building – the ability to see issues in their appropriate context and understand their ramifications – leads to knowledge-empowerment. This is a key element of rights based, people-centric development. There has been a common appreciation by all parties of the value of knowledge resources in the SO→VDO→CBO chain. The value to the community is immense, and is almost a sufficient reason, in itself, for promoting the intermediation process.

(e) *Place of funding in the intermediation process*

It is evident that the issue of funding or donor access plays a major role in the intermediation process. A significant component of the SO→VDO→CBO chain is

funding either as expectation or as actual. While this is not surprising, it is important to recognize that there is a possibility that the CBO affiliates itself to the VDO and the VDO affiliates itself to the SO on a strategic consideration as to whether it will have enhanced access to funding or potential sources of funding. However, there was no evidence that this was the only reason for CBOs to associate with VDOs, or VDOs with SOs. The quality of intermediation would decline substantially if funding access drove the relations. It is important to remember though, that there is a culture of donor-driven programs in the development scenario and this pitfall needs to be avoided, though it is never easy.

(f) Being operational, not intermediary

A point of concern has to do with the unique organizational cycle of an SO. There has been a tendency among the SOs to start some amount of direct work with communities, bypassing the intermediary layer of VDOs. However, this was a common experience in the intermediation business where in the medium to long-term, the support organization has to reinvent its role because others have built their capacities to be its equal.