

Interim findings

CSOs in sustainable development in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, civil society organizations (CSOs) have played an important role in advancing sustainable development by raising public awareness, developing their own capacity, and engaging with the state. However, these organizations have faced a number of legal, financial, social and other structural barriers that have limited their effectiveness and reach. In this research project, we explore how CSOs have advanced the sustainable development agenda in Ethiopia and examine the various obstacles they face. The aim of the research is to enhance scientific knowledge about the work, experiences and challenges faced by Ethiopian CSOs working in the environment and development sector and to explore how CSOs are helping to realize sustainable development in Ethiopia. The research aims to provide a better understanding of the work and activities of CSOs in supporting sustainable development by raising public awareness through the dissemination of research outputs and supporting the capacity building of CSOs, research institutes, organs of justice, and government officials. The following are the interim findings and policy messages from the project.

Interim findings:

- **Ethiopia is currently at a crossroads, which will impact on CSOs and sustainable development:** Over the past few months, the Ethiopian government has been working towards rapid reform in various areas, raising the hopes of many Ethiopians that the country is entering a new period of democratization and accountable governance. An important reform came at the beginning of this year with the adoption of Ethiopia's new civil society law, which replaces the current stringent regulatory framework for CSOs. While it is too early to know exactly what the impact of the law will be on civil society, the new legislation does appear to take significant strides towards the creation of an enabling environment for CSOs and better protection of the right to freedom of association and expression. The new law envisions a far greater role for self-regulation in the civil society sector but, worryingly, still maintains a high degree of state oversight through registration, reporting and funding allocation requirements. Although the regulatory environment for CSOs is improving, the sector is still in need of international support and ongoing, consistent and reliable funding.
- **Most of the organizations interviewed expressed support for the regulation of civil society to ensure transparency and accountability in the sector:** Most agreed, however, that the regulation of CSOs in Ethiopia since 2009 went too far, unnecessarily restricting CSO activities and intervening in funding and cost allocation. Many organizations identified a lack of strong self-regulatory mechanisms as a longstanding problem for them, which affects the effectiveness and public image of the CSO sector in Ethiopia. A better organized sector, with a greater degree of self-regulation, may discourage excessive or overzealous regulation by the state and improve the public image of the sector. The new law makes provision for a Council of Civil Society Organisations, empowered to enact a code of conduct for the sector, and this may address this need. However, questions remain about whether the new Council will be independent of state influence and able to represent the interests of diverse CSOs in a rapidly evolving sector.
- **Despite regulatory attempts to suppress CSO advocacy activities, some organizations have found innovative ways to do advocacy through service delivery:** In Ethiopia, the state has sought to limit the political influence of foreign civil society organizations by only allowing them to engage in service delivery activities. The state has strictly defined service delivery as excluding advocacy and other types of political engagement. This has created many challenges for foreign-funded CSOs working on human rights issues. Nevertheless, some CSOs have managed to find innovative ways to blur the line between service delivery and advocacy work. Despite the recent law reform process, many organizations may still face obstacles when engaging in advocacy work as a result of government and public perceptions and expectations. Interviewed organizations representatives expressed the need for donors to assist in breaking down the idea that service delivery and advocacy are wholly separable activities by funding advocacy-through-service-delivery (or on the ground advocacy) and by recognizing the crucial connections between human

rights, political activism and participation, and delivering basic services. This is particularly crucial in the field of sustainable development where new, innovative and sustainable approaches to development need to be demonstrated and integrated into community (and government) practice.

- **The Ethiopian government is not necessarily intolerant of civil society:** There is an assumption in the literature that the Ethiopian government is wholly intolerant of civil society. However, we found that the relationship between sustainable development CSOs and the Ethiopian government cannot be characterized so simply. CSOs report having good relationships with many sector administrators and line ministers of the government at various levels. However, they face many legal and bureaucratic challenges in their dealings with the Charities and Societies Agency and its regional counterparts. Given the ongoing role of the Agency under the new law, challenges of this sort are likely to remain to some extent. Organizations recognize the need for high levels of coordination in the sustainable development sector and, therefore, partnerships with local, regional and federal government entities are crucial.
- **Strategic partnerships can improve cooperation, but more needs to be done to facilitate CSO networks and collective action:** The Charities and Societies Proclamation 2009 has caused some CSO networks to shut down and others to shrink their activities. This has limited cooperation between CSOs and had a particularly devastating impact on sustainable development CSOs, some of which are unable to coordinate their activities or ensure that key environmental concerns are being addressed. Strategic partnerships are a valuable step towards achieving greater cooperation, but more needs to be done to facilitate CSO networks and collective action in the sustainable development sector.
- **Innovative types of funding can help CSOs operate in circumstances of political constraint:** Many advocacy and rights-based CSOs survived the funding crisis because of the European Union Civil Society Fund and the World Bank's Social Accountability Fund. Both these funding schemes are treated as domestic funds and are not subject to the 90:10 funding restriction placed on Ethiopian CSOs. These innovative types of funding could help CSOs operating under political constraints. Some organizations reported receiving 90% of their funds from these grants, however, and this can also make these organizations vulnerable.
- **Changing funding priorities, which tend to follow the political interests of Western donors, have had additional adverse impacts on the stability of CSOs in Ethiopia:** Ensuring sustainable development and addressing major environmental degradation requires long-term CSO engagement and funding.
- **Interviewed organizations reported seeing almost no participation by the private sector in sustainable development initiatives and work:** Interviews with trade unions revealed that international law and trade mechanisms have had a positive impact on the behaviour of private business towards employees. Similarly, international pressure might have a positive impact on the private sector's environmental practices. However, improving environmental practices needs to extend beyond traded goods to include infrastructure, land, agriculture, energy production and other domestic activities in Ethiopia. More needs to be done to highlight the role of private business and investors, and to facilitate engagement and cooperation between the private and CSOs sectors.

Policy messages:

- We recommend including the concept of 'organizational space', along with political space, in the Theory of Change (ToC) for Dialogue & Dissent. Our interviews suggest that CSOs see many of the constraints they face as affecting their organizational, rather than their political, space. The concept of political space is extremely widely defined in the ToC and encompasses many of the concerns raised, however, there are a number of reasons why narrowing political space and including organizational space might be preferable. First, interviewees did not see internal constraints (high staff turnover, poor management, demotivation) or donor-related funding constraints (shifts in donor priorities, limited duration funding) as strictly or primarily political. Hence, the notion of political space does not seem to 'fit'. Second, in politically constrained environments, it is safer to engage the state and other CSOs around the concept of organizational space. For these reasons, we would suggest including a narrower definition of political space and adding the notion of organizational space. While these concepts may overlap, this may allow for a broader understanding and discussions of the ways in which the existence, operations and political activities of CSOs are limited. This is particularly important in this period of legal transition in which the political space might be opening, but the operational space of organizations might still be limited.

- The line between service delivery and advocacy work is not always a clear one. Funding that is strictly limited to only advocacy work and excludes any service delivery activities may hinder the work and progress of the beneficiary organizations. The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs should support organizations attempting to do advocacy work through service delivery. This is still advocacy funding, but funding that recognizes that the service delivery/advocacy dichotomy is not always a useful or accurate one. This could be done by altering funding conditions to allow different kinds of approaches by CSOs. For example, funding for advocacy and policy-based work could be aligned with, or at least should not prohibit, service delivery activities. This could include on-the-ground advocacy or service-based advocacy. In addition, Northern CSOs that offer financial and/or non-financial support should also be sensitive to the overlap between different kinds of work and activities.
- Holistic approaches should be preferred over issue-based funding to ensure the sustainability of organizations and their activities. Funding strategies should be guided by the principles of programme sustainability and be aligned with the interests and priorities of the targeted beneficiaries. Long-term commitments to sustainable development should not be compromised by ever-changing donor priorities. This means valuing existing capacity and not just strengthening new capacity. It is also important to recognize the role of sustainable development programmes in ensuring other rights and political goals. For example, work on food stability (which includes sound land and water management) can also address external and internal migration and displacement.
- Organizations face enormous delays in establishing and registering new projects and programmes. Funding programmes not only need to accommodate these delays, but funders and Northern CSOs should also include support programmes and initiatives that facilitate CSOs struggling to meet the administrative and reporting demands of the state. Since registration is still a requirement under the new CSO law (and in fact all organizations are required to reregister) this kind of support remains crucial.
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' efforts to create partnerships with Northern and Southern CSOs has already had positive impacts on CSOs operating in Ethiopia. The Ministry should continue to encourage and invest in these partnerships, but might also consider extending these partnerships to include businesses and investors. Business has a significant role to play in advancing the role and wellbeing of CSOs, particularly in regard to sustainable development. The Ministry and Embassy should encourage or require Dutch businesses and investors to partner with CSOs and to demand the participation of CSOs, particularly in social and environmental impact assessment processes.

Knowledge products:

- Broeckhoven, N., Gidey, D., Townsend, D., & Verschuuren, J. (2018). Reopening political space for CSOs under pressure: the case of Ethiopia's sustainable development CSOs. *Law and Literature Review*, April 2018, p. 104
- Verschuuren, J. (2018). CSOs in sustainable development in Ethiopia. Summary literature review. <http://includeplatform.net/downloads/summary-literature-review-csos-sustainable-development-ethiopia/>
- Verschuuren, J. (2018). CSOs in sustainable development in Ethiopia. Presentation at 'New roles of CSOs for inclusive development: knowledge sharing workshop: results from literature review', 17 May 2018, Leiden
- Townsend, D. & Broeckhoven N. (2018). Supporting local civil society organizations in Ethiopia. Assumptions blog post, 14 November 2018. <http://includeplatform.net/supporting-local-civil-society-organisations-ethiopia/>
- Townsend, D. & Broeckhoven, N. (2018) Rights and development: the cost of human rights in Ethiopia. Paper presented at the UDHR70 Conference, 14 December 2018, Leuven.
- Townsend, D. (2019) Opinion: Ethiopia's new civil society law. Blog post, 11 March 2019. <https://includeplatform.net/ethiopias-new-civil-society-law/>

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Web link:

<http://includeplatform.net/new-roles-csos-inclusive-development/reopening-political-space-csos-ethiopia/>