Interim findings
Civil society advocacy collaborations in India

The puzzle guiding this research project is: How to facilitate a greater leading role for Southern civil society organizations (CSOs) in collaborations? To solve this puzzle, we study Indian CSOs' representative roles as *they* conceive of them, embedded in *their* relations and context. What are Indian CSOs seeking to be? In collaboration with whom? From what understanding of the reality in which they find themselves? Based on our findings on this, we consider the implications of findings for donors and Northern CSOs. We study India as a case, approaching India as one Southern context that can offer insights into the ways in which contextual understandings of civil society's roles can help develop perspectives on the role that donors, Northern CSOs, and other Southern CSOs can potentially contribute to civil society's representative roles in the Global South. The study focuses on CSO activity around two themes: disaster risk reduction and women's rights.

Interim findings

- **Roles are contextually shaped as CSOs strategically manoeuvre civic space, shaping their relation with the state differently**. At present, many CSOs experience limited openness of the state to critical voices. However, space for CSOs to exercise their representative role is contingent on a range of factors like the (national and subnational) regime, their alignment with state objectives, personal relations between CSOs and state agencies/officials, and the policy domain. Moreover, depending on the role they envisage for themselves in the Indian context, CSOs strategically manoeuvre the civic space available to them in diverse ways. This leads to diverse CSO-state interactions, which can be characterized as follows:
    - Working with the state in providing policy support, upon invitation, and through subcontracting. This support centres on CSOs' knowledge of the situation on-the-ground, connections and technical expertise, with limited space for overtly political CSO agendas.
    - Pressuring the state publicly through e.g. movement building, mobilization of public resistance, campaigning on issues, and litigation
    - 'Working the state'.[1] This takes two forms: (1) navigating the laws, actors and institutions of the state to bring about change (e.g. drawing on the support of one state agency to counter another; pushing the state to enforce the constitution), and (2) refraining from open confrontation, but strategically navigating restricted space (e.g. tweaking policy while providing policy support to the state; leveraging personal and political relations to preserve civic space; or managing visibility and seeking deniability, while being involved in pressuring the state)
- **Roles of CSOs are contextually shaped, as CSOs have different, but related, representative roles at different levels.** CSOs in India have many organizational forms and capacities and represent a wide range of diverse groups, causes, interests and perspectives. They address a broad range of vulnerabilities faced by sections of Indian society and represent a variety of marginalized groups, engaging the state. Local CSOs organize and develop their capacities as autonomous actors, and voice their concerns and interests pertaining to, for example, implementation deficits, corruption and exclusion, as they present themselves locally, and engage with local-level policy actors. Professional state and national level CSOs contribute to the capacity of local CSOs as autonomous actors, but also work with the state in the development and implementation of local-level policy. At the state and national levels, CSOs (often operating in networks) carry out advocacy for societal change, political agenda setting, and policy development and implementation. These national and state level CSOs often also play a pivotal role linking, and translating between, local, national and international levels. For example, while many CBOs and grassroots groups seek to speak for themselves, national and state level CSOs

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[1] This expression appears to be first coined (with a related meaning) in Williams, P., Vira, B., & Chopra, D. (2011). Marginality, agency and power: Experiencing the state in contemporary India. *Pacific Affairs*, *84*(1), 7–23.

can often play a role in linking them with each other and with policymaking arenas, bridging different understandings, and using opportunities (for example, by helping them frame their demands in terms that resonate with the state). Issues of elite dominance do emerge here. Importantly, the capacity of local groups to take up representative roles (e.g. confidence and access to political arenas) may take time to develop, precisely because of structural inequalities that marginalize many sections of Indian society.

- **Roles of CSOs are contextually shaped, as CSOs work from a primarily domestic orientation.** CSOs value international collaboration for funding, knowledge exchange/learning, visibility and credibility, and these collaborations contribute to shaping CSOs' representative roles. At the same time, their understanding of issues (like marginality), agendas and strategies are domestically shaped in important ways. This means drawing on contextually-defined capacities, involving extensive knowledge and skills specific to the areas they target and the societal groups they work with. Their legitimacy in the eyes of the state often rests on their local linkages, grounded expertise and domestic track record in service delivery, as well as their role in policy implementation. Relatedly, CSOs often seek complementarities with domestic CSOs, bringing together diverse capacities and seeking to connect and integrate diverse voices.

Beyond these key findings on the role of context, the project also found that:

- **There is an overlap between the roles of CSOs.** In the strategic manoeuvring of civic space, there is an overlap between the roles of CSOs in capacity development, service delivery and advocacy, which makes their roles more representative in nature than they may seem. For example, capacity development can include advocacy (e.g. leadership and movement building); service delivery can include advocacy (e.g. addressing exclusions, while supporting state policy implementation); and capacity development can take place in the context of service delivery (e.g. raising marginalized groups' awareness of entitlements under government schemes, while carrying out service delivery).
- **Civic space is complex.** While the Indian state seeks to control the representative role of some CSOs by controlling their funding and their invited participation in policymaking, the state does not control public campaigning by civil society that challenges state policy, seeks to advance issues onto the state agenda, or shift societal norms. Pressuring the state and influencing public opinion are common and accepted parts of Indian democracy that have contributed to agenda setting and policy change on multiple occasions. It is important here to distinguish the roles of professional CSOs, which are more easily controlled by the state through funding, and the roles of social movements and networks, which are less subjected to such control.
- **Meeting donor agendas and requirements can compromise the autonomy and representativeness of CSOs.** Matching locally-rooted organizational agendas with those of partners who are also donors can be challenging**.** Meeting donor agendas and requirements can compromise the autonomy of CSOs to shape their representative roles. This problem, which is well-described in existing research on North-South collaboration, also presents itself when Indian CSOs fund other Indian CSOs, creating similar donor dependencies.
- **CSOs and their roles develop in interaction, and the autonomy and ownership of CSOs is relative and dynamic.** One should be careful of approaching CSOs as fixed entities with one authentic self-made outlook. For example, shared agendas and understandings can be a foundation for collaboration, but collaboration can also build shared agendas and understandings.

Policy messages:

- **How to advance Southern leadership? We recommend doing this by 'Starting from the South'.** To strengthen representative roles of Southern CSOs, it is advisable not to start with programme development led by Northern actors, for which suitable partners are subsequently identified. Instead, start from the question: how can we acknowledge and link up with existing civil society in a specific Southern context? Be explicit about who has what added value for whom and what, doing justice to diversities in understandings, agendas and capacities. This requires starting out from a deep analysis of country contexts and diverse roles that CSOs have and seek there, at different levels, as well as analysis of the ways in which what collaboration can help whom, to what end.

Beyond this main message, in addition this project recommend the following:

- Taking context seriously may demand supporting a **variety of representative roles** by CSOs at different levels. Northern actors need to be open to the possibility that for Southern CSOs, international collaboration may have a relevant, but less important, role than domestic collaboration. Consider supporting these to make the most of the potential added value of domestic complementarities, knowledge exchange and coordinated acting.
- **Consider civic space in context**. Donors and Northern CSOs need to understand state-civil society relations in a country so that they can do justice to complexities, like the differentiated forms of political space and the ways in which these can be navigated.
- To address challenges to ownership and autonomy in collaborations between CSOs and advance mutuality, we recommend to **address power relations by distributing control over funds**.
- To do justice to existing civil society and the diversities in specific contexts, we recommend to work with **contextually-defined results frameworks** that do justice to the diverse roles of CSOs and conditions under which they work. For example, the development of representative roles for marginalized groups may benefit from a longer-term orientation.

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