INCLUDE

Cross-cutting issues in New Roles of CSOs for Inclusive Development

The research programme '[New Roles of CSOs for Inclusive Development](#)' is coming to an end with a closing conference called '[Co-creating Knowledge on Advocacy with Civil Society](#)' on 8 October. Breakout sessions in this conference will discuss the following cross-cutting issues, identified based on a [synthesis literature review](#) and findings of the [eight research projects](#) under the programme.

1. Embeddedness and legitimacy

The legitimacy of CSOs must be seen in terms of their relationship with other actors, including state actors (at different levels), communities, the private sector and other CSOs. These actors have varied and diverse relationships with CSOs, and perceive the legitimacy of CSOs based on a range of factors such as thematic focus, the visibility of activities, tangible results, knowledgeability and transparency. An important factor contributing to legitimacy is the local embeddedness of CSOs. For instance, CSOs without grass-roots support often end their activities after foreign funding stops and are generally less effective. However, local embeddedness does not mean local inclusion: it can come at the expense of excluded community members. Moreover, local CSOs are often unable to access funds due to issues such as lack of a credible reputation. This increases dependency on larger CSOs.

Key question: *To what extent is the local embeddedness of CSOs pivotal for inclusive development?*

2. Cooperation between CSOs

Various researchers argue that improved cooperation and coordination between CSOs can improve their effectiveness and efficiency. Cooperation can help overcome key constraints, such as lack of human resources, skills and knowledge, and enhance effective cooperation in contexts of low civic space. CSOs manoeuvre strategically through 'division of labour' in advocacy activities, with some influencing political and legal practices, while others carry out research, raise awareness and engage in advocacy at the local level. Not only is this division efficient and effective, it can also serve as a shield to prevent individual persecution in high-risk activities. However, a rigid division of labour can also reduce synergies, such as in cases where advocacy and service delivery are combined.

Key question: *What is needed to increase cooperation between CSOs efficiently and effectively?*

3. How 'non-state' actors limit civic space

As well as formal and procedural ways, civic space is often limit by exerting power in various fluid ways. For instance, CSO staff with low financial resources can be subject to bribery, co-option or deception to damage their reputation. At the same time, staff may experience harassment, (digital) surveillance and violence to directly limit their operating space. These efforts are often not made by state actors, but come from actors that serve as extensions of the state, blurring the line between the two. Sometimes businesses with conflicting interests try to intimidate local CSOs or unions, fund opposing CSOs, and or carry out scapegoating through the media. Other actors, such as youth groups, the media and government-aligned CSOs perform a similar mix of direct and indirect threats. They are often aligned with state strategies; first non-state actors delegitimize the CSOs, followed by state restrictions (or vice versa). Not being formally state-related, these actors have more freedom to take harsh action against CSOs than state actors.

Key question: *How can CSOs anticipate, mitigate and respond to non-state pressure?*

4. Partnerships with unusual suspects

States are usually perceived as either tolerant of civil society or not. The misunderstanding lies not only in this dichotomy, but in the unidimensional view of tolerance. In contexts considered to be 'intolerant', CSOs can still have good relationships with various government bodies. Hence, we need to unpack the concept of

an 'intolerant state' and assess the relationships of CSOs with various state actors, including local bureaucrats, the police, the media and various administrative bodies. In general, the private sector is an overlooked actor. Although the private sector is generally sensitive to societal pressure, it is seldom engaged in CSO partnerships.

Key question: *What incentives can increase partnerships between CSOs and the private sector?*

5. Dynamic support in limited civic space

In places with limited civic space, governments often allow CSOs to only perform service delivery activities, while limiting room for advocacy. However, research shows that CSOs find innovative ways to manoeuvre in this context, enabling them to address human rights issues under the umbrella of service delivery. To be able to perform these activities jointly and strategically, there is a need for dynamic funding by donors. Researchers argue that service delivery and advocacy are not fully separable and should, therefore, not be funded separately. Instead, if donors decide to support advocacy, they may need to do so by focusing on advocacy through service delivery and by allowing multiple strategies by CSOs, aligned to needs in a particular political context. Advocacy often implies ad hoc activities that require dynamic and timely funding, for which the aid chain often does not provide space.

Key question: *How can donor support for advocacy be provided more dynamically?*

6. Project-based funding

Donors often provide funding to CSOs, and their local partners, for the term of a project. Various researchers report the detrimental effect of disrupted or discontinued funding on the capacity and sustainability of local CSOs and argue for holistic approaches. Providing long-term core support and participation in agenda-setting can be effective in reaching the beneficiaries of a CSO and helping it perform its political role. It can also decrease the dependency of local CSOs and reduce the pressure on them to align themselves with donor agendas, as well as overcome the tendency of CSOs to devote more funding to service delivery than to advocacy and recognize local partners within the core vision and mission of their organization.

Key question: *Under which conditions can donors provide funding to CSOs on a long-term basis?*

7. Roles of international NGOs

The aid chain is mainly organized through I/NGOs extending funds to local CSOs, based on donor agendas and priorities, giving such I/NGOs the position of broker. This raises questions about their specific roles, and if the aid chain can be organized more effectively through a direct relationship between donors and local CSOs. The functions of I/NGOs go beyond mere funding and must, therefore, be carefully considered. They can strengthen advocacy efforts, play a mediating role and share information and build capacity, among other things. These roles are defined in the design phase of programmes, which is also when power imbalances between partners in the North and South emerge.

Key question: *Is the position of I/NGOs as brokers in the aid chain benefiting the functioning of CSOs?*

8. Operating in low civic space

Unpacking civic space as a concept is essential for assessing it in each context. Towards this end, the more all-encompassing term 'organizational space' has been coined. This maintains a focus on state repression, but also encompasses the constraints imposed internally (inside CSOs) or by donors. This concepts helps to distinguish between law and power: the organizational space of CSOs can still be limited in countries where laws and regulations are not necessarily unfavourable. The activities performed by CSOs inherently influence their legitimacy in the eyes of the state and citizens. There are often attempts to delegitimize advocacy-oriented CSOs. It is important to acknowledge the diversity of strategies that CSOs use to manoeuvre in this limited space. Some CSOs go 'under the radar' in their advocacy efforts, while others shift towards service delivery or disappear completely.

Key question: *What support do CSOs need for their different strategies in contexts of limited civic space?*