

UPDATE ON ISSUES AND PRINCIPLES FOR CSO EFFECTIVENESS

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This meeting represents a very exciting convergence of factors highlighting the need for an international consensus of civil society organisations on what defines our development effectiveness.

Many factors have led to this point – including increasing public awareness of poverty issues, together with increased expectations by donors and the public alike of development CSOs' professionalism, accountability for outcomes and demonstrable impact. But the most immediate factors that have led us here today were the regional and global consultations around CSOs, the Paris Declaration and aid effectiveness. From a critique about the limitations of the Paris Declaration, and increasing pressure on CSOs to adhere to the five principles of the Declaration, the conversations have appropriately expanded to include consideration of what aid and development effectiveness looks like from the CSO perspective. These conversations obviously build on the work that various CSO platforms, global initiatives like the Accountability Charter and individual agencies have engaged in over recent years and which will be detailed later by my colleague Anne Buchanan from the Canadian platform.

The overarching objective of this meeting is to initiate a process whereby CSOs globally:

- identify the principles underpinning CSO development effectiveness,
- develop tools to support their implementation, and
- promote these principles both within the CSO sector as well as with donors, governments and the public to build their appreciation of the role of CSOs as development actors.

To establish part of the context for this discussion, I have been asked to provide a brief overview of the principles and issues of CSO effectiveness. In doing this I will draw on both the issues identified in the consultations and the Australian CSO work on effectiveness.

Defining CSO effectiveness

The first issue to be addressed is definitional. Our working definition is that:

“Development effectiveness is about the impact of aid on the poor and marginalised communities, while aid effectiveness is about technical issues in aid management and delivery”.

As Australian development CSOs, in our framework we defined effectiveness more specifically as:

“Promoting sustainable change that addresses the causes as well as the symptoms of poverty and marginalisation – i.e. reduces poverty and build capacity within communities, civil society and government to address their own development priorities.”

Guiding principles of CSO effectiveness

Consultations under the auspices of the Advisory Group on Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness came up with a first set of principles guiding CSO effectiveness as development actors. They determined that CSO actions:

1. should be focused on poverty eradication and the promotion of human rights, expressing social solidarity with people claiming their rights.
2. are people centred, striving to empower individuals and communities, as well as to strengthen democratic ownership and participation.
3. are based on approaches rooted in the practice of international human rights (rights-based approach) and the promotion of social justice.

4. are based on genuine and long term partnerships, respect and dialogue, acknowledging at the same time the importance of CSO diversity in democratic practice.
5. strive to have sustainable impact and results, based on social processes of empowerment and mutual learning. And, finally, must
6. ensure their own effectiveness through continuous enhancement of their:
 - transparency
 - accountability to all levels (communities, donors, peers, the public)
 - autonomy from states
 - coordination with others

Opportunities and challenges arising from these principles of CSO effectiveness

Sounds straightforward, but what are the opportunities and challenges? We know that we can be very precious about the nuances in our own views of what constitutes good development practice; that we can jealously guard our independence and can ignore rather than acknowledge how the competitive element in our relationships can undermine our capacity for collaboration and genuine partnership. **The principles and tools we establish for CSO effectiveness need to be grounded in an appreciation of the opportunities and challenges if they are to genuinely guide our ways of working and contribute to continual improvements in our development practice.**

The following are some specific key issues, both opportunities and challenges, to be considered as we define the CSO effectiveness agenda:

1. **Demonstrating our effectiveness is critical** – support is increasingly dependent on demonstration of the impact we have on reducing poverty and marginalisation and increasing the realisation of human rights. Must be evidence-based and not simply anecdotal, requiring stronger focus on evaluation.
2. **Effective development requires effective partnerships which needs to be balanced with accountability and reality of competition** for scarce resources and differences in approach. The need to demonstrate individual agency effectiveness can run counter to shared effectiveness which is required by partnerships focused on more than individual programme level changes.
3. **Emphasis of development effectiveness on governance, increasing participation and democratic reform** – provides potentially unique opportunities, drawing on the strengths of CSO approaches, for increased engagement in development cooperation at all levels.
4. **Maintaining genuine partnerships built on social solidarity**. With much of the focus on accountability around programme management and donor risk mitigation, there are strong risks that the North-South CSO relationships could increasingly be defined by purchaser/provider rather partnership models.
5. **Core funding for SCSO organisational effectiveness** and development is required for enhancing effectiveness, rather than focusing only on programmatic capacity building and funding.
6. **Alignment and harmonisation** is required as an element of organisational effectiveness within the larger INGO alliances/families to reduce transaction costs and leverage resources for greater impact (World Vision has, for instance, 97 entities).
7. **Collaboration can provide enabling contexts** for greater commitment to continual reflection, learning and sharing of best practice. ANGO experience – greater collegiality.

8. **Highly politicised sector**, strength is the passion and commitment but **that can become highly divisive** where differences of approach and interpretation give rise to heated debates and fierce competition.
9. **Diversity is a strength** - responsive, pluralist, agile, innovative but **also risks being divisive, fragmenting** voice and influence in large policy debates. Diversity can lead to irrelevance if all perspectives are represented within that diversity. Also can lead to **marginalisation of critical southern voices**.
10. How will this work **integrate with external accountability** mechanisms like Sphere, HAP, the Accountability Charter? Challenge is to incorporate but maintain simplicity and accessibility.
11. **Turning around the programme and policy setting agenda to be genuinely field focused** – i.e. driven by southern priorities rather than northern funding opportunities and constituency priorities/interests. Action Aid experience of implementing ALPS case in point - difficulty in living out commitment to great accountability to the poor and bearing consequences of that in terms of donor and organisational needs.
12. How will we **hold ourselves and each other accountable** for adhering to these principles and embedding them in our organisational business processes – particularly transparency and accountable mechanisms to the poor and marginalised?

I want to end with a couple of reflections from the Australian NGO experience in developing the ACFID NGO Effectiveness Framework. A strength was the **bottom up approach** of not getting hung up on definitional issues but rather through a process of appreciative enquiry and case study workshops, identifying the key elements of CSO effectiveness. An immediate challenge that emerged through the process was whether we were establishing **aspirational standards or ones to which we would hold ourselves accountable**. This question can be quite daunting as we are all acutely aware of the gap between our aspirations and actual capacities and performance.

The other key issue that we are currently grappling with is that our framework was based largely on professional experience and judgement. This needs to be **tested to validate these judgements against the experience of communities, partners and other stakeholders**. Our current research agenda asks whether our effectiveness framework reflects the partner and community experience of effective programming? And this brings me back to the issue of evidence-based effectiveness principles.

This global process is exciting in that it provides the basis for bringing together our experience as CSOs for a more holistic understanding of development effectiveness. A linked exciting development is the work currently being done on identifying the particular dimensions of civic-driven change – i.e. identifying what role civil society broadly plays in driving social change processes. There is an upcoming conference in the Netherlands, which Alan Fowler is actively engaged in, to explore this further and this will provide important insights into our agenda here.