

## Action Area 2.4 - Civil society Partnerships

### Concept note

#### Introduction

Through their community roots and outreach, civil society organisations<sup>1</sup> (CSOs) play a fundamental role in development, including by empowering and providing services to people living in poverty and by working to ensure that the voices of all groups of society are heard.

Inclusive partnerships was first proposed as an effectiveness principle in the [Accra Agenda for Action](#) in 2008, stating that “all partners - including donors in the OECD Development Assistance Committee and developing countries, as well as other donors, foundations and civil society - participate fully”. It stressed the fundamental, independent role of civil society in engaging citizens. In the [Busan Partnership Agreement](#) in 2011, the principle evolved to talk about “recognising the different and complementary roles of all actors” and included specific paragraphs on the role of civil society organisations and the private sector.

The [Nairobi Outcome Document](#) restated the essential role of civil society as an independent partner. The Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (GPEDC) recognises the importance of civil society in sustainable development and in leaving no-one behind; in engaging with governments to uphold their commitments; and in being development actors in their own right. Therefore it is essential for civil society voices to be heard and this requires concerted effort to reverse the trend of shrinking civic space wherever it is taking place and to build a positive environment for sustainable development, peaceful societies, accountable governance and achievement of the Agenda 2030. As stated in the document<sup>2</sup>, GPEDC members commit to accelerating progress in providing an enabling environment for civil society including in legal and regulatory terms, in line with internationally agreed rights. In this context multi-stakeholder dialogues at country level, supported by capacity building measures, are encouraged.

Besides that, as the Global Partnership is a multi-stakeholder platform, its monitoring exercise is a unique multi-stakeholder process. When participating in the monitoring, partner country governments engage in dialogue with their development partners and their domestic development actors in order to discuss the status of development co-operation in the country and to identify solutions for more effective development partnerships. A dedicated monitoring indicator (GPEDC indicator 2) focuses on the CSO-enabling environment and looks at the conditions for CSOs to operate and effectively contribute to development efforts. In the multi-stakeholder dialogue around this CSO indicator, governments, focal points from CSOs and development partners discuss their different roles in creating an enabling environment for CSOs and ensuring CSOs own effectiveness to contribute to sustainable development at country level.

In recent weeks in early 2020, COVID-19 has affected the global community hard and fast. Extraordinary, but necessary, measures have been quickly enacted in many countries to respond to the humanitarian emergency. Many of these laws and measures challenge human rights norms – freedom of assembly and mobility, the right to privacy, and opportunities to participate. In some countries civil society has witnessed aggressive authoritarian responses, including massive surveillance measures, which have affected civic space and the capacities of civil society to respond to the crisis. Such laws are often perpetuated post-crisis. Protecting civic space in the times of crisis is not just a test for the viability of democracy in our societies, but a foundation for effective actions to counter the medium-

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<sup>1</sup> Civil society includes development NGOs, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, philanthropy organisations, professional associations, trade unions, social movements, coalitions and advocacy groups.

<sup>2</sup> Nairobi Outcome Document (2016), page 6, point 18.

term impacts of the spread of COVID-19. This context accentuates the relevance and importance of this Action area for all stakeholders in the Global Partnership.

The GPEDC Work Programme for 2020-2022 is currently being developed and will guide its work towards the 3rd GPEDC High Level Meeting, planned for 2022. This concept note intends to frame the discussions and conceptualisation of Action area 2.4: Civil Society Partnerships, which is part of Strategic Priority 2: Building better partnerships, of the GPEDC's Work Programme.

### **Enabling civil society participation and addressing shrinking space**

As development is essentially a locally driven political process<sup>3</sup>, governments have the unique responsibility to lead sustainable development and to uphold human rights. But their efforts cannot be successful without the inclusive and equitable participation of all actors. National and subnational governments, parliaments, civil society organisations, the private sector, foundations, trade unions, communities, and individuals each have different and complementary roles to play in the collective pursuit of sustainable development.

Action area 2.4 focusses on **strengthening civil society partnerships and enabling CSO participation in development processes**, beginning with planning and continuing through implementing and monitoring national development strategies. It requires governments to recognise the different and complementary roles of all development actors, civil society, private sector and development partners along, as well as openness and mutual respect among the stakeholders.

The [2019 GPEDC Global Progress Report](#) showed that, although several good practices exist, the overall **conditions affecting CSOs' contributions to development have deteriorated** in the period between the 2016 and 2018 Global Partnership monitoring rounds. CSOs report that there has been a decline in the legal and regulatory frameworks that upholds an enabling environment for civil society to act. Furthermore, CSOs in 27% of partner countries report that CSO expression is either extensively or fully controlled by government. In 32% of partner countries, CSOs working with marginalised and at-risk populations experience harassment from public authorities. Moreover, CSOs do not consider development partners' funding mechanisms to be predictable, transparent or accessible to a diversity of CSOs and report in most countries that funding received is primarily driven by the providers' own interests and priorities. When assessing their own effectiveness, CSOs also recognise the need for improvements. In 27% of partner countries, CSO-coordination mechanisms were considered weak, for example in terms of leadership, inclusive participation, resources for engagement and/or accountability to domestic organisations. CSOs play a fundamental role in development and therefore partner country governments must redouble efforts to foster an enabling environment for CSOs in order to deliver on the 2030 Agenda and its call for a whole-of-society development effort.

In order to redress this trend and to improve the environment for CSOs to engage in and to contribute to development, concerted action across all stakeholders is needed. The following parameters for each stakeholder group set the ambition for this action area:

#### **Civil society organisations can, in line with the Istanbul Principles for CSO Development Effectiveness and the Siem Reap Framework for Implementation, ensure their own effectiveness by:**

- **Engaging in equitable partnerships among CSOs**, which are based on mutual interest, trust and local ownership between the financing CSOs and their CSO partners.
- **Co-ordination and collaboration among themselves**, at all levels (national, regional, sectoral) to facilitate engagement in policy dialogue. This can be done by participating in CSO-initiated co-ordination mechanisms like platforms, networks and associations.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/article/understanding-politics-development>

- **Implementing its own policies and programs in line with international human rights standards and principles**, such as human rights-based approaches. CSOs should work in ways that institutionalize these policies to guide their external and internal practices.
- **Aligning with accountability mechanisms** to address CSOs' transparency and accountabilities. These mechanisms are ideally CSO-initiated and managed, and are guided by standards and codes of conduct.

#### Partner country governments can create CSO enabling conditions by:

- **Providing a space for CSO dialogue on national development policies.** This includes consulting CSOs in the design, implementation and monitoring of national development policies, and reflecting the results of these consultations in development policies. In the context of Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), governments should also consult CSOs in the prioritisation, implementation and monitoring of the SDGs. Giving CSOs the right to access relevant information is also crucial for their effective participation in government consultations.
- **Creating and practising a legal and regulatory framework that enable CSOs' engagement and contribution to development.** This involves the provision of rights, in law and in practice, for CSOs to assemble and express themselves, and for CSO formation, registration and operation. Respecting CSOs working with marginalised populations and at-risk groups and facilitating their access to resources are also important aspects of an enabling environment. Ensuring human rights organizations and defenders can operate in an environment free from violence and discrimination.

#### Development partners can effectively partner with CSOs by:

- **Consulting CSOs in the design, implementation and monitoring of their (DPs) development co-operation policies and programmes.** These consultations should be regular, institutionalised and involve a diversity of CSOs, with particular emphasis on inclusion of CSOs from partner countries. The agenda of these consultations should be jointly set and include donor initiatives at the international, national and local levels.
- **Promoting an enabling environment for CSOs when holding policy dialogue with partner country governments.** During these dialogues, development partners can stress the need to address constraints on the enabling environment or with the protection of human rights defenders and actively seek to identify measures to improve it.
- **Offering quality financial support to CSOs.** Through their financial support, development partners can strengthen CSO operations, promote the work of human rights organisations and increase CSOs' independence, diversity and responsiveness to community needs and priorities. In order to do that, funding mechanisms need to be predictable, flexible, long-term, transparent and accessible to a diversity of CSOs as well as emphasise CSO-defined initiatives. Co-ordination, simplification and harmonisation of funding requirements among development partners also constitute good practice that contributes to reduced transaction costs for CSOs. Preferably, the support should be to civil society and civil society actors in partner countries in their own right.
- **Being transparent about CSO support**, making available detailed information about financing to CSOs, including sectors, objectives, geographic locations, etc. Transparency regarding flows for CSOs is important to enhance the accountability of CSOs in partner countries towards their citizens.

#### Translating the vision into action

To achieve the shared ambition to reach Agenda 2030, development actors will need to partner more effectively and building on each other's strengths and unique contributions. Initiatives can take many forms, and involve a diversity of stakeholders, including the ideas below:

- Identify bottle necks at country level to enabling environment and agreeing on measures and targets for each of the key stakeholders (partner country governments, development partners and CSOs) for their resolution.
- Collect existing good practices of CSO contributions to the implementation of national development plans and SDG implementation including to the enabling environment to inspire partner governments and civil society in other countries.
- Convene multi-stakeholder dialogues at country level to discuss and promote CSO Development Effectiveness and an enabling environment for civil society to contribute to achieving sustainable development. These (online) workshops would bring together CSOs, the government and development partners to strengthen their collaboration and to look for joint solutions to improve the environment for CSO engagement, tailored to the national development context.
- Collaborate with other action areas across the GPEDC work programme to expand reach and impact. Collaboration with Action area 3.1 (Moving beyond monitoring evidence to increased use of results) is of particular interest as it plans to support country-level dialogue and action by using results from the 2018 Monitoring Round, including on the CSO indicator.
- Identify best policy, practises and funding modalities for supporting civil society and explore new approaches to improve impact and effectiveness. Support ongoing efforts (e.g. OECD/DAC, Sida, DFID) to further develop common guidance for development partners to work more effectively with civil society. This guidance would help donors improve their policies and practices for an enabling environment for civil society.
- Support advocacy alongside key global meetings, such as the UN HLPF and HRC, to promote specific changes to improve the enabling environment as part of the annual reporting cycles on the SDGs and Human Rights frameworks.
- Convene a global dialogue in the lead up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> GPEDC High Level Meeting based on good practices and success stories on the role of CSOs as development actors. It would be an opportunity to show how the situation has evolved since the last Senior Level Meeting in July 2019, or in other terms, translating results into action. It would guide the different actors to take necessary steps required to change behaviour at global and national level in favour of enabling environment for effective engagement of civil society in development processes.
- Draw attention to the relationship of a strong enabling environment for CSOs in bridging the development effectiveness agenda and 2030 Agenda in country level processes in planning, implementing and monitoring outcomes for the SDGs. Produce a policy note or statement including specific and targeted policy recommendations on civil society partnerships and CSO enabling environment and CSO development effectiveness. This statement would be shared with decision makers attending the 3<sup>rd</sup> GPEDC High Level Meeting.

### Next steps

- Sharing this Concept note with the participants/interested partners of this action area.
- Finalising this Concept Note and reach out to communicate the way forward (including the elaboration of a proposal, with workplan, division of labour, timeline, specific targets and budget).
- Starting outreach activities to mobilize partner countries and additional actors to insure buy-in and participation.
- Clarifying interaction with other action areas, including the monitoring.
- Clarifying operational working arrangements and leadership.
- Discuss and decide how to build on existing documented good practises and country evidence, e.g. the policy document *Guidance and Good Practice on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment (Task Team, April 2019)*.

Note: A zoom based workshop could be organised after finalisation of the Concept Note and/or by trying to mobilize additional actors.