forus CONNECT SUPPORT INFLUENCE

Executive Summary

Cooperation That Works

Civil Society in South-South and Triangular Cooperation

2026

South-South and Triangular Cooperation can help countries and communities share practical solutions shaped by comparable experiences and challenges, making cooperation more locally grounded, context-responsive and politically legitimate.

Executive Summary

As the 2030 Agenda enters its final years, it is increasingly clear that development challenges cannot be addressed through business-as-usual cooperation models alone.

While financing gaps remain significant, the challenge is also about how cooperation is organised, whose knowledge counts, and whether development efforts are genuinely rooted in local realities and priorities.

In this context, South-South and triangular cooperation (SSTC) are gaining importance as both an alternative and a complement to traditional development cooperation. South-South cooperation refers to collaboration between countries of the Global South based on solidarity, mutual benefit and the exchange of knowledge, experience, technology and resources. Triangular cooperation builds on these partnerships by bringing in multilateral organisations or traditional development partners to support South-led initiatives. Together, SSTC can help countries and communities share practical solutions shaped by comparable experiences and challenges, making cooperation more locally grounded, context-responsive and politically legitimate.

Yet this potential is not automatic. SSTC can also reproduce exclusion, opacity and state-centric decision-making when the actors closest to communities are left outside programme design, financing, governance and monitoring.

This is where civil society matters.

Civil society organisations (CSOs), national platforms and regional coalitions bring capacities that governments and multilateral institutions cannot easily replicate on their own. They generate community-level evidence, connect local realities to policy spaces, facilitate peer learning across borders, and help ensure that cooperation remains accountable to the people it is intended to serve. Their participation is not only a question of inclusion, but also of effectiveness, legitimacy and sustainability.

Drawing on evidence and experiences from across the Forus network, **this report examines four questions:** what makes SSTC effective, what civil society contributes, where exclusion persists, and what changes are needed in policy, financing and governance to make SSTC more inclusive, accountable and locally grounded.

Key Findings

SSTC works best when it is adapted, not copied.

The strongest examples of South-South and triangular cooperation are those where knowledge moves between contexts but is reshaped to fit local institutions, communities, political realities, and resource constraints. Civil society strengthens this process because it holds the practical knowledge needed to understand what will work, for whom, and under what conditions.

Civil society improves the quality and reaches of cooperation.

Civil society helps cooperation actors understand what communities need, what has already been tried, what needs adaptation, and where implementation risks are emerging. In Senegal, civil society-led inclusive data work strengthened national SDG monitoring and influenced ministry data practices. In the Pacific, PIANGO (the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations) and its National Liaison Units show how regional civil society networks can move practical knowledge across many countries, including on public finance accountability, budget transparency, and citizen engagement.

Formal civil society inclusion in SSTC governance remains the exception rather than the norm.

Across the cases reviewed, civil society is often active in practice but absent from formal governance, financing, and reporting systems. In some contexts, civil society contributes knowledge and accountability after key decisions have already been made. In others, it is consulted informally but not structurally involved. The issue is therefore not a lack of civil society capacity. It is an architectural gap: cooperation systems are still designed primarily around governments, agencies, and financial institutions, even when effective implementation depends on wider social ownership. In South Korea, KCOC (the Korean Council for Overseas Development Cooperation)'s structured engagement with government shows that civil society can move from implementing projects to shaping cooperation policy.

Civil society-led peer learning is already a form of South-South cooperation, but it remains largely invisible and under-resourced.

Forus members are already exchanging approaches on SDG monitoring, localisation, public finance accountability, disaster resilience, climate adaptation, civic space, and community participation. These exchanges often move faster and at lower cost than conventional technical assistance because they are based on peer trust, comparable constraints, and practical adaptation. Yet they are rarely counted in official SSTC data, rarely funded as cooperation infrastructure, and rarely connected to national or regional SSTC strategies.

Exclusion has real costs. SSTC governance needs to become more transparent, participatory, and accountable.

Where civil society is absent from design and monitoring, cooperation can become less accountable, less responsive, and less sustainable. The ProSAVANA —a triangular cooperation programme launched in 2009 involving Mozambique, Brazil and Japan to support agricultural development in Mozambique's Nacala Corridor — remains the clearest cautionary example of triangular cooperation designed without sufficient participation of affected communities and civil society accountability actors. Civil society organisations and movements in Mozambique, Brazil, and Japan raised sustained concerns from 2011 onwards about land rights, transparency, community consultation, and the attempted transfer of an agro-industrial model to smallholder farming contexts. In May 2013, Mozambican civil society organisations addressed an open letter to the presidents of Brazil, Japan, and Mozambique, calling for the program to be stopped. The program was ultimately suspended following years of sustained cross-border civil society pressure. The lesson is direct: accountability to communities must be designed in from the start of triangular cooperation programs—not added after implementation has failed. Cases from fragile or politically constrained contexts also show that when civic space narrows, state-to-state cooperation can continue while community oversight weakens precisely when it is most needed.

The post-2030 development framework must learn from SSTC, but it must not romanticize it.

South-South cooperation brings important principles for the future: horizontality, solidarity, mutual learning, local leadership, and partnership beyond donor-recipient hierarchies. But SSTC is also shaped by geopolitical interests, regional power dynamics, strategic competition, and unequal access to resources. A post-2030 framework should therefore embed the best of SSTC while correcting its weaknesses: stronger transparency, meaningful participation, rights-based safeguards, financing for locally led peer learning, and recognition of civil society as a cooperation actor.

Key Findings

The recommendations in this report are addressed to the actors best positioned to influence how South-South and triangular cooperation is designed, financed, monitored, reported and recognised. The central ask is not simply for civil society to be "included", but for cooperation systems to recognise that civil society participation improves the quality, legitimacy, accountability and sustainability of SSTC.

National governments and SSTC lead institutions should institutionalise civil society participation in SSTC governance, design, monitoring and reporting.

This includes ministries of foreign affairs, planning and finance; national cooperation agencies; SDG coordination bodies; and SSTC focal points. Civil society should be involved before priorities, partners and programme models are finalised, not only consulted after decisions have already been taken. This would help governments improve targeting, identify implementation risks earlier, reach communities that official systems may miss, and strengthen public legitimacy.

United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC), United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the wider UN development system should recognise civil society-led peer learning, citizen-generated evidence and community monitoring as part of the SSTC ecosystem.

UN-supported SSTC initiatives should include civil society in programme design, implementation, monitoring and review. Countries should also be encouraged to report civil society contributions to SSTC in Voluntary National Review (VNR), Voluntary Local Review (VLR), national SDG reporting and UN knowledge platforms.

Triangular cooperation providers and facilitators should make civil society participation a funded design requirement.

Bilateral agencies, OECD-DAC members, emerging providers, EU/Team Europe actors, UN agencies and other triangular cooperation facilitators should budget for civil society participation, translation, community consultation, peer exchange, documentation and accountability from the outset. This would help prevent triangular cooperation from reproducing top-down aid dynamics under a different label.

Regional intergovernmental organisations should open regional SSTC, SDG and peer-learning mechanisms to structured civil society participation.

Regional bodies that coordinate cooperation, SDG implementation or policy learning should involve national and regional civil society platforms in agenda-setting, evidence generation, monitoring and regional accountability. Civil society participation can help ensure that regional cooperation reflects community realities, not only intergovernmental priorities.

Transparency, safeguard, and participation standards should apply to technical cooperation and investment by public development banks and development finance institutions linked to SSTC.

Public development banks also have an important role to play in promoting enabling environments for civil society, including through transparency, access to information, accountability mechanisms, robust environmental and social safeguards, and meaningful participation of affected communities in projects and policy processes linked to technical cooperation, infrastructure, climate finance and regional public goods. Where relevant, they should also call on governments to lift restrictions on civic space and public participation.

Global development cooperation policy processes should embed civil society participation, civic space, transparency and accountability in the future cooperation agenda.

This includes SDG review, U.N ,Finance for Development (FfD) follow-up, development effectiveness discussions, UNOSSC/BAPA+ follow-up, OECD-DAC triangular cooperation discussions and future development cooperation debates. The future of cooperation should not only be more horizontal between states; it must also be accountable to people and communities.

Forus members and civil society networks should document, name and advocate for civil society-led SSTC.

National and regional platforms should map SSTC entry points, collect evidence of peer learning, and use national, regional and global advocacy spaces to push for civil society participation in SSTC governance and financing.

SSTC will only reach its full promise if it is not left to governments and institutions alone. Civil society already connects communities, countries and regions in ways that make cooperation more effective. The task now is to recognise, resource and institutionalise that role. If the SDGs are to be rescued in their final years, cooperation must change, and that change starts by recognising civil society as a core actor, not an afterthought.

Join the Virtual Launch of the Report

Forus is a member-led network of **74 National NGO Platforms and 8 Regional Coalitions from all continents representing over 24,000 NGOs** active locally and internationally on development, human rights, social justice, environmental issues, and more. Special thank you to Wendy and Alain Dubreuil as well as David Helguera for the translations of the report into French and Spanish.

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