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Sustainable development by shifting the power

*Capacity strengthening of civil society as a
key tool for the implementation of SDG 17*



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The development of this report has been possible thanks to the valuable contributions of the members of the Forus Advisory Group on SDG 17 & CSO Capacity Strengthening.

This Advisory Group included representatives from **ABONG** (Brazil), **ADA** (Asia), **Alianza ONG** (Dominican Republic), **Bond** (United Kingdom) **CCONG** (Colombia), **Cooperation Canada** (Canada), **FINGO** (Finland), **InterAction** (United States), **LAPAS** (Latvia), **NFN** (Nepal), **NNNGO** (Nigeria), **PDA** (Pakistan), **PLATONG** (Cape Verde) and **UNNGOF** (Uganda).

The experiences and advice of members of this Advisory Group have informed the substance and recommendations of this report. We also thank the **Forus Regional Coalitions** (ADA, PIANGO, REPAOC, REPONGAC, SADC-CNGO, MESA) whose representatives have shared their insights during various discussions on CSO capacity strengthening.

All the above-mentioned members helped us to explore the potential of CSO capacity strengthening to be an important tool in shifting power and rebalancing the skewed power dynamics that still exist between the Global South and the Global North. We thank them for their input and for the different accounts of CSO capacity strengthening in their countries which they provided for this report.

This report was coordinated, written and laid out by the Forus Secretariat team, particularly by Joyce Soares, Deirdre de Burca, Estefania Acosta, Lorena Siqueira and Bibbi Abruzzini. We would like to thank Marcela Terán for the cover and Forus' pool of photojournalists for contributing the visuals of the report. Finally, Forus would like to thank Wendy and Alain Dubreuil and Álvaro Martínez Bueno for translating the report into French and Spanish.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many people in the international development sector recognize the need for transformative reform of the existing aid and development system. This reform aims to shift power dynamics and move away from past and current realities where Global North actors are “decision-makers” and Global South actors are “recipients”. Such a transformation is crucial for the people and places most affected by crisis and poverty.

The capacity strengthening of civil society plays a vital role in this process. Civil society organizations (CSOs) are key actors in promoting equitable and sustainable development worldwide.

They contribute to democratic processes, defending and promoting human rights at multiple levels, locally, nationally, regionally, and globally. To effectively shape policies and initiatives, continuous learning and capacity sharing are vital for CSOs. Strengthening CSO capacities also enhances their ability to collaborate between themselves, create joint initiatives with different stakeholders, gain visibility, and have a greater impact on development and democracy processes.



Unequal power relationships can often be reinforced by existing or presumed differences in capacity. This results in one set of actors being perceived to possess valuable skills, knowledge and resources, while the other set is relegated to the role of passive recipients, with their own knowledge and expertise undervalued or disregarded. Unfortunately, this dynamic is all too often implicit in relationships between donors or International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and their partners in the Global South. To address this, donors and INGOs need to reconceptualise their relationships with partners in the global majority.¹ It is essential to recognize the invaluable knowledge of these stakeholders, putting their expertise at the centre of the initiatives concerning their own societies and countries.

Part of this power shift will involve fostering locally-led and locally-driven development. Localization is a critical pillar of sustainable development, based on a recognition of the importance of communities having ownership over the development processes taking place in their own neighbourhoods. Localization means fully recognizing the value of assets within the communities where development takes place and elevating the voices of community representatives. Organizations from the Global North will need to change their operating systems and organizational cultures and will undoubtedly themselves require significant capacity strengthening for this purpose.

The growing trend towards localization will mean ensuring that CSOs in the Global South have control and ownership over all aspects of their work, including any aspects linked to sharing capacity. It is important that local CSOs should decide on their own learning agenda. CSO capacity strengthening initiatives must be created by and with local stakeholders, build on existing capacities, recognize and value local knowledge and capitalize on it from the outset. Access for CSOs, and particularly for local CSOs, to regular opportunities for capacity strengthening plays a role in increasing their legitimacy and ability to develop their leadership role in their specific contexts.



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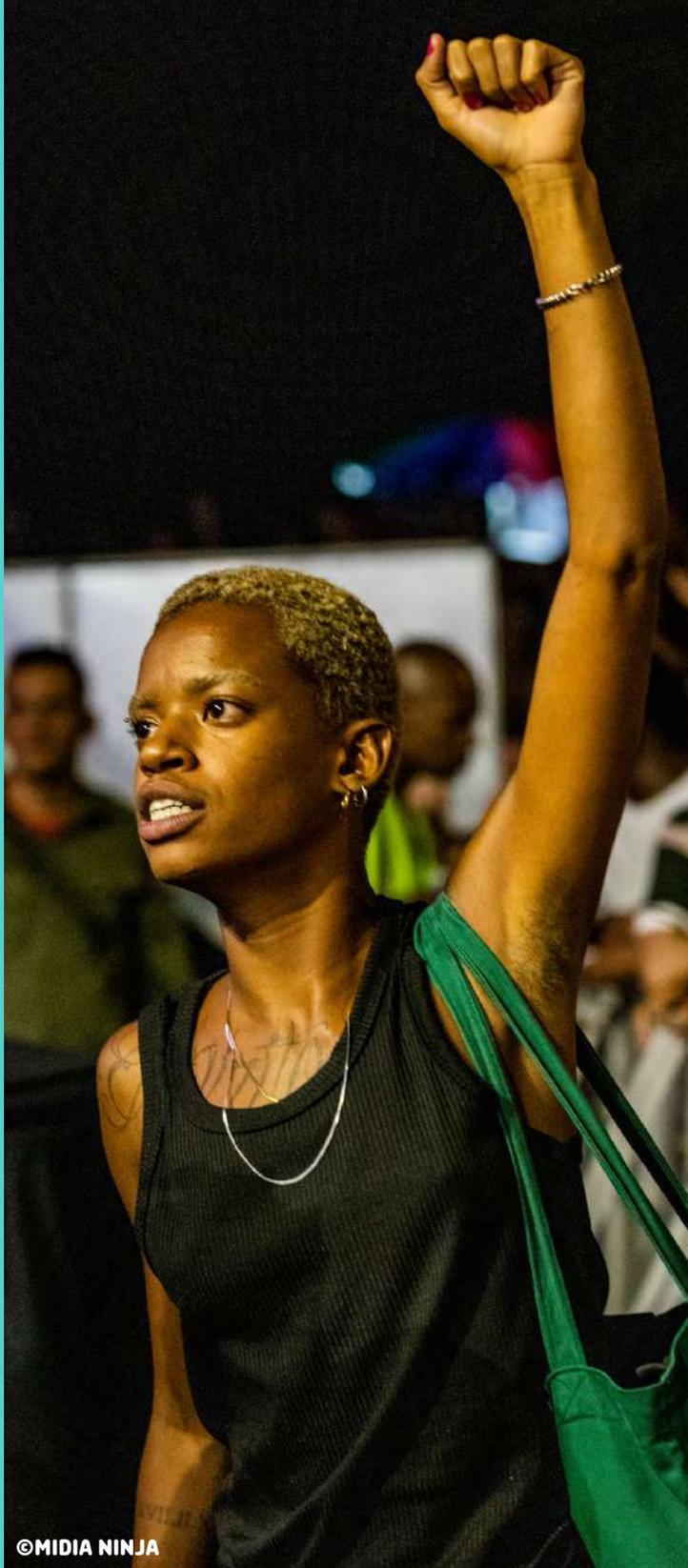
¹ “The terms ‘global majority’ (usually referred to as the ‘Global South’) and ‘global minority’ (usually referred to as the ‘Global North’) shift our understanding of global power and culture away from the idea that everything centres on, or is led by, wealthier and white-majority nations that historically were colonizers. It recentres Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) as the majority, moving away from the minoritization experienced in white supremacist and colonial history and culture”. *OXFAM, “Inclusive Language Guide” (Oxfam, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.21201/2021.7611>.*

Decolonization is an essential component of power shift between rich countries and the global majority. While it might be initially associated with the process of independence of former colonies, here it is related to the colonial attitudes that remain embedded in language, thought, relationships, and economic and social inequalities over time. A growing body of development research upholds the view that colonialism has actively shaped how development actors in international cooperation currently think about and position themselves in the sector.

Studies which explore the challenges surrounding the achievement of genuine decolonization propose that it involves a fundamental change in mindset. Their findings suggest that despite the pervasive influence of imposed colonial values, traditions and cultures, valuing the knowledge of populations which have been subject to processes of colonization is crucial and capacity strengthening of CSOs has a key role in putting them forward. Research has also indicated that colonial influences in language and imagery continue to inform the communication strategies, policies and products of INGOs. By acknowledging the enduring effects of colonialism and actively engaging in decolonization efforts, actors in the development sector can work towards dismantling power imbalances and promoting more inclusive and equitable practices.

The existing compliance systems tied to donor funding also need to be deeply transformed by this change in mindset. It is crucial to develop decolonized compliance systems that simultaneously uphold accountability and transparency.

Over the years, CSOs have consistently raised concerns about the onerous and repetitive processes imposed on Global South-based organizations. These systems tend to perpetuate the colonial notion that local organizations in southern countries are inherently risky, with the burden of risk largely falling on the donor rather than recognizing the agency and responsibility of the local community. The knowledge and leadership of local civil society organisations cannot come to the forefront while the funding system continues to privilege the Global North.



Positive social change is not just the result of project delivery. It demands the mobilization of people and resources, including the presence of a strong organized civil society that can navigate changes in its context, has the ability to react to developments, is proactive and takes initiative. A strong, thriving and sustainable civil society is crucial for broader social change. Where CSO funding is concerned, the importance of investing in organized civil society and the ecosystems which support its flourishing, extending beyond isolated development projects, has proven to be very impactful if sustained.

In order to effectively strengthen CSO capacity, funding should also include core funding for organizational development. This includes supporting CSOs to develop better systems of financial management, human resource management, and enhanced systems of public accountability and transparency. Such capacity strengthening efforts will not only contribute to building strong organizations but will also enhance the credibility and reputation of CSOs in the eyes of the public and other stakeholders.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes in goal 17, which is called Global Partnership and Means of Implementation, that capacity strengthening is part of the means of implementation for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Regarding the track record of Member states of the United Nations (UN MS) in relation to CSO capacity strengthening, research conducted by Forus since 2017, based on the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) presented to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) reveals a slight improvement in the reporting on capacity strengthening efforts targeting civil society and other stakeholders.

Despite this, further progress is still needed. Forus calls the national governments and the United Nations to adopt a strategic, long-term, well-thought-out, and properly resourced approach which prioritizes the capacity strengthening of civil society organisations and other stakeholders. Annual national targets should be set, in particular for the capacity strengthening of different stakeholder groups related to the monitoring and implementation of the SDGs, which requires the understanding of complex international processes and the resources to be able to do so.

CSO capacity strengthening should be targeted at local and sub-national CSOs in particular, to support policies of localization and locally-led development. At the same time, international and bilateral donors should not be prescriptive in their funding of CSO capacity strengthening but should instead create the conditions for autonomy on the part of CSOs in planning, designing and evaluating their own capacity strengthening programmes and initiatives.

Responsibility for ensuring the capacity strengthening of CSOs everywhere should be shared between national, regional and global levels, particularly in the context of implementing the 2030 Agenda. Innovative and flexible new CSO funding mechanisms, prioritizing long-term and unrestricted financial support need to be urgently developed, both to resource CSO capacity strengthening and to ensure that less formalized forms of civic participation (e.g. social movements) are also eligible to receive funding.



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Decolonization is an essential component of power shift between rich countries and the global majority.

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With the contribution of the following Forus' members



THIS REPORT IS DIVIDED INTO SIX CHAPTERS.



CHAPTER 1

This chapter explores the significance of capacity strengthening for CSOs and its role in influencing public policies and democratic processes at various levels. It emphasizes the need for continuous learning to enhance CSOs' impact and visibility in development initiatives.

CHAPTER 3

This chapter delves into power imbalances in relationships between actors from the Global North and the Global South. It brings recent research on the importance of transforming and reconceptualizing these relationships, valuing local knowledge and expertise, and actively engaging in decolonization efforts to promote inclusive practices and dismantle power imbalances.

CHAPTER 2

This chapter analyzes the representation of capacity strengthening in the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) since 2017. It provides an overview of past years and delves into the details of the 2022 VNRs, recognizing the vital role of CSOs in promoting equitable and sustainable development and examining how this role is reflected in the VNRs.

CHAPTER 4

This chapter addresses the funding challenges faced by CSOs, particularly the heavy reliance on project grants and limited access to core funding. It emphasizes the importance of providing funding for the overall sustainability of CSOs and networks of CSOs. It presents concrete suggestions that have emerged from debates within the Forus network.

CHAPTER 5

This chapter presents an overview of regional and national approaches to CSO capacity strengthening. It sheds light on the challenges, strategies, and initiatives undertaken by CSOs to enhance their effectiveness in promoting social and environmental agendas. These case studies offer insights into the diverse landscapes and dynamics of CSO capacity strengthening efforts.

CHAPTER 6

This chapter concludes the report and provides a set of short recommendations for efforts around CSO capacity strengthening.



INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development acknowledges the importance of capacity strengthening as a means of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal 17, known as Global Partnership and Means of Implementation, specifically recognizes the role of capacity strengthening.²

This report examines the relationship between CSO capacity strengthening and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It highlights the crucial role of CSOs in achieving the SDGs and calls for strategic, long-term, and well-resourced approaches to prioritize capacity strengthening efforts aligned with the SDGs.

As part of a series of annual Forus reports, this report provides an overview of the progress made by UN Member States in promoting the capacity strengthening of civil society globally. The assessment of progress is based on the commitments made by governments when they adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with a particular focus on CSO capacity strengthening. This focus is especially important given the growing trend of shrinking civic space for CSOs worldwide.

It is important to note that each year's report compares the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) from different governments, aiming to identify overall trends despite the changing set of presenting governments.



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² ONU, "Capacity Development | Department of Economic and Social Affairs," 2023, <https://sdgs.un.org/topics/capacity-development>.

This report specifically emphasizes the critical role of civil society capacity strengthening in accelerating positive trends in the international development sector. These trends include the movement towards greater localization, power shifts, and the decolonization of development policies and practices.

The methodology for developing this report consisted of several components. Firstly, it included an up-to-date review of the literature on CSO capacity strengthening as well as related topics of localization, decolonization, and power shift between the Global South and the Global North.³ This literature review provided a foundation for several insights for the report. Secondly, it included an analysis of the 2022 VNRs submitted by UN Member States to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). Thirdly, the report incorporated advice and input from the Forus Advisory Group on SDG 17 & CSO capacity strengthening. This Advisory Group played a crucial role in providing guidance throughout the development of this report. Finally, written accounts of CSO capacity strengthening initiatives and practices from national and regional contexts were submitted by members of the Advisory Group.

It's worth noting that although SDG 17 of the 2030 Agenda uses the term "capacity building," this report adopts the term "capacity strengthening." Forus and its members believe that language matters. This shift in terminology acknowledges the significant capacities that already exist within civil society worldwide. It signifies a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between organizations and the people they work with, demonstrating an increased awareness of how language can assert power or perpetuate discrimination and exclusion.



³ 'Global South' and 'Global North' help us to discern majority Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) countries from rich, mainly white countries that colonized them. They're imperfect terms due to geography (e.g. Australia is in the Global South), and how they overlook the differences in contexts and cultures. Sometimes we say 'global majority' to reflect the proportion of the world who are BIPOC" [OXFAM, "Inclusive Language Guide."](#)

WHAT IS THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT?

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a global action plan adopted by the United Nations (UN) and its member states in September 2015. It provides a comprehensive framework for addressing the world's most pressing social, economic, and environmental challenges over a 15-year period, with the ultimate goal of achieving sustainable development by the year 2030. The agenda encompasses 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets, covering a wide range of interconnected issues, including poverty eradication, climate change, gender equality, education, and sustainable economic growth. The SDGs within the 2030 Agenda are designed to be universal, applying to all countries regardless of their level of development. They are also interconnected, acknowledging the complex and interrelated nature of global challenges. The agenda emphasizes the need for an inclusive and participatory approach, engaging governments, civil society, the private sector, and other stakeholders to work together in implementing the goals.

WHAT ARE THE VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS?

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents a shared commitment among countries to tackle the world's most urgent problems. The Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) are reports voluntarily submitted by UN member states to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) as part of the follow-up and review process of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Each year, a different set of countries presents their VNRs, assessing their progress in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and sharing examples of national-level actions. The level of participation from different stakeholders in the preparation of the VNRs strongly differs and, in most countries, civil society organisations gather to present “spotlight reports”, offering their perspectives on the SDG implementation in the country.

WHY IS FORUS ANALYSING THE VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS?

Forus focuses its analysis on examining how governments address CSO capacity strengthening in their VNRs. The goal is to identify the extent to which this important aspect is acknowledged or overlooked by the governments in their voluntary reports. By assessing the inclusion or exclusion of civil society capacity strengthening, Forus aims to provide valuable insights into the progress made and identify areas that require further attention. The objective is to offer observations and recommendations that can foster enhanced collaboration and effectiveness in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

CHAPTER 1: CAPACITY STRENGTHENING OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a crucial role in advancing equitable and sustainable development on a global scale. Their contributions are vital for upholding democracy and human rights, fighting against climate breakdown and fostering accountability. While facing shrinking civic space, capacity strengthening of CSOs is even more essential.

SDG 17 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development emphasizes the need to strengthen the means of implementation for achieving its goals. Achieving the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda requires mobilizing political will; deepening partnerships among governments, the private sector, and civil society; enhancing international cooperation; and ensuring policy coherence. In this context, SDG 17 identifies capacity strengthening (referred to as capacity building in the Agenda) as a critical means of implementing the 2030 Agenda. It calls for actions to enhance stakeholder capacities, including those of civil society, at all levels to effectively implement the SDGs.

Below are the targets as agreed upon in the agenda.⁴

SDG Target 17.9 states: “Enhance international support for implementing effective and targeted capacity-building in developing countries to support national plans to implement all the Sustainable Development Goals, including through North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation”.

SDG Target 17.17 states: “Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships”.

SDG Target 17.18 states: “By 2020, enhance capacity-building support to developing countries, including for least developed countries and small island developing States, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts”.

⁴ United Nations, “Sustainable Development Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals,” accessed June 19, 2023, <https://caribbean.un.org/en/sdgs/17>.

WHY PRIORITIZE THE CAPACITY STRENGTHENING OF CSOS?

According to the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC),⁵ a strong and effective civil society is not only a key development outcome but also plays a crucial role in advancing social and economic development for marginalized and vulnerable groups. The 2030 Agenda also recognizes the significant role of civil society in promoting sustainable development worldwide.

However, the operating conditions of civil society vary greatly across countries and regions. These conditions encompass factors such as the availability of civic space, levels of cooperation with local and national governments, opportunities for collaboration with other stakeholders (including the private sector), access to sufficient and predictable resources, and ongoing capacity strengthening. These conditions affect the possibility to build true horizontal partnerships with CSOs and support their work.

Acknowledging the importance of organized civil society in development highlights the need to invest in civil society and the ecosystems that foster its growth, rather than solely focusing on isolated development projects. Positive social transformation requires more than just project execution; it necessitates the mobilization of individuals and resources facilitated by a robust civil society that understands its environment, responds to evolving circumstances, and demonstrates proactive initiative. A resilient and sustainable civil society is pivotal in driving comprehensive social change.

In order to be effective in the many roles they play, CSOs require long-term flexible investment beyond project implementation, which includes strengthening their organizational capacities.



This contributes to building the credibility of CSOs in the eyes of the general public and other stakeholders. The public interest role of civil society organizations is that they create opportunities for individuals to thrive in democratic societies, exercise their civil and political rights, and ensure the protection of all other human rights. Strengthening CSO capacities is crucial for democracies to fulfil their responsibilities in respecting and upholding the rights and well-being of their citizens.⁶

Civil society organizations, with their historical advocacy for marginalized communities, possess invaluable first-hand insights into the challenges faced by humanity and can contribute to the creation of improved and more adapted public policies. However, more often than not, this data is not considered by decision-makers. By building the digital capacities of CSOs and providing them with appropriate digital infrastructures, they can safely share this data with stakeholders within or outside their country. This would not only enhance the digital capacities of communities but also significantly increase cross-sector capacities to design more effective and inclusive interventions and policies.

INTRAC⁷ proposes that trust between donors and CSOs, flexibility in funding and developing sector-wide capacities as well as those of individual organizations are all critical factors that contribute to the sustainability of capacity strengthening initiatives in the Global South.

THE ONGOING CAPACITY STRENGTHENING OF CIVIL SOCIETY GLOBALLY CAN HAVE WIDE-RANGING POSITIVE IMPACTS ON SOCIETY. PROPER PLANNING AND SUFFICIENT RESOURCES DEDICATED TO STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITY OF ORGANIZED CIVIL SOCIETY ENABLE THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE FOLLOWING.



⁵ INTRAC and Dr E. Kumi, Dr K. Bandyopadhyay & P. Collada, "Landscape Analysis of CSO Capacity Strengthening Efforts in the Global South," 2021, <https://www.intrac.org/resources/landscape-analysis-of-cso-capacity-strengthening-efforts-in-the-global-south/>.

⁶ CCONG, "Guidelines and Citizen Proposals. Public Policy Contributions to Favor the Enabling Environment of CSOs. p. 29. Unpublished Document, Financed by Suma Social -USAID,," 2023.

⁷ INTRAC and Dr E. Kumi, Dr K. Bandyopadhyay & P. Collada, "Landscape Analysis of CSO Capacity Strengthening Efforts in the Global South."



INFLUENCING DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL POLICIES

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a crucial role in promoting sustainable development and human rights worldwide. CSOs can influence public policies and collaborate with various stakeholders to increase their political impact, particularly when related to development and democracy. Additionally, ensuring proper funding and capacity sharing between civil society organisations in different countries increases their ability to hold their governments accountable.



ENABLING CSOS TO PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE IN INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

Civil society organisations are regularly faced with new sets of external requirements and expectations, including the international community's expectation that CSOs should play an integral role in the monitoring and implementation of the Agenda for Sustainable Development. CSOs around the world could be assuming even more key roles linked to the monitoring and implementation of Agenda 2030, including in data-gathering & analysis. Strengthening the capacity of CSOs enables them to meet evolving external requirements and demands while also shaping national agenda-setting and fostering meaningful debates.



BUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY RESILIENCE

The operating conditions of civil society vary significantly around the world, with an alarming trend of shrinking civic space and the criminalisation of civil society actors in many countries. It is crucial to strengthen the resilience of CSOs and enhance their capacity to survive and thrive in challenging contexts where their presence is most needed. Supporting innovative strategies developed by civil society to counteract the restrictions on civic activism and defend civic space is essential. Additional resources can amplify CSOs' efforts to navigate the growing limitations and to defend an enabling environment at the national level.



PROVIDING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Continuous capacity strengthening of CSOs enhances their capacity to amplify the voices of different communities and take on leadership roles in driving social change within their societies. By investing in their capabilities, CSOs can effectively address the concerns and aspirations of their constituencies, advocating for transformative actions and fostering inclusive and sustainable development.



FACILITATING PEER EXCHANGE & LEARNING

Promoting sustained capacity strengthening of CSOs in the long term facilitates reciprocal exchange and interaction among CSOs from different regions, enabling them to share information, learn from each other, and develop practices and methodologies for more impactful outcomes. National NGO platforms and regional coalitions within networks like Forus benefit from this support, which in turn has a multiplier effect on the capacity strengthening of their individual members.



PROMOTING COLLABORATIVE WORK BETWEEN CSOS & WITH OTHER KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Facilitating collaborative work between CSOs and other key stakeholders is crucial for achieving collective impact. CSOs have valuable opportunities to engage in partnerships and cooperation with a range of actors, including academia and the private sector, at different levels from local to global. By continuously strengthening their capacities, CSOs can contribute even more to the objectives set forth in SDG 17. This involves organizing themselves to effectively participate in regional and global CSO networks and campaigns, ensuring that their voices are heard and their efforts are coordinated. Through sustained capacity strengthening, CSOs are able to cultivate collaborative relationships, tap into diverse expertise, and increase their collective influence in addressing global challenges and driving positive change. By working together with other stakeholders, CSOs can maximize their impact and create meaningful and lasting outcomes in pursuit of their shared goals.



REINFORCING CSO GOVERNANCE, ACCOUNTABILITY AND TECHNICAL EXPERTISE

CSOs can greatly benefit from continuous capacity strengthening, which serves multiple purposes for their organizational functioning. Firstly, it enhances the governance and accountability systems within CSOs, reinforcing their structures and promoting transparency and effectiveness. Secondly, capacity strengthening supports resource mobilization efforts, reducing the dependence on a single external funding source and diversifying financial sustainability for the long term. By expanding their resource base, CSOs become more resilient and adaptable to changing circumstances. Moreover, capacity strengthening initiatives can increase the technical expertise of CSOs to effectively utilize digital tools for data gathering and analysis. This equips CSOs with the necessary skills to leverage digital opportunities, make evidence-based decisions, and advocate for collective demands based on clear and compelling evidence.



PROMOTING AWARENESS OF GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP.

Facilitating the work of CSOs through ongoing capacity strengthening can play a significant role in disseminating awareness of global citizenship. This can be instrumental in countering prevailing trends of isolationism, sectarianism, exceptionalism, and opposition to migration. By equipping CSOs with the necessary resources and skills, they can promote a broader perspective and understanding of interconnectedness among individuals and communities across borders. This enhanced awareness of global citizenship can contribute to bridging divides, promoting inclusivity, and cultivating a sense of shared responsibility for addressing global challenges.

COLLECTIVE LEARNING, THE FORUS' APPROACH TO CSO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Forus views capacity strengthening as a horizontal process that emphasizes learning together and from each other. Each person contributes with their expertise and knowledge while building connections within and outside the Forus network. To achieve this, Forus employs various methods such as guidance, workshops (both virtual and in-person), learning by doing, consultancies, peer support, and the creation and dissemination of information and materials.

Rather than enforcing a top-down approach, Forus acts as an enabler in capacity strengthening by identifying, valuing, and leveraging the expertise of its members for the benefit of the entire network. The approach is jointly planned with member organizations, building upon their organizational strengths.

Forus' approach is impact-oriented, needs-based, peer-to-peer, and aims to develop leadership, promote expertise and innovation, and facilitate the exchange of practices at national, regional, and global levels. Forus also fosters partnerships with organizations that have specific expertise to bring about challenging and critical questions to the table. The ultimate goal is to strengthen the voice of civil society worldwide and achieve ambitious and measurable impacts in sustainable and inclusive development.

To ensure its capacity strengthening strategy aligns with the identified needs of national and regional members, Forus conducts comprehensive assessments of their capacity strengthening requirements. These assessments provide valuable information and serve as a baseline for evaluating the effectiveness of Forus' strategy. The findings also inform the advocacy efforts of Forus and its members in seeking funding for capacity strengthening and network building.



Recognizing the diverse resources and needs among its members, Forus provides financial support as part of its capacity strengthening. By establishing partnerships with national platforms, Forus facilitates the implementation of concrete capacity strengthening projects aligned with the specific priorities and needs of its members. Joint projects are encouraged to strengthen connections, foster synergies, and promote mutual learning among members. Peer exchange exercises and regular funds are provided to regional coalitions to implement advocacy and capacity strengthening activities focused on their national members.

Forus places significant emphasis on developing broader leadership skills through peer exchanges on leadership, social change, and the evolving roles of national NGO platforms. The Leadership Development Program, for instance, brought together visionary individuals who are shaping the functioning of CSO networks and guiding them into current challenges.

As a global player, Forus advocates for predictable and flexible resources for capacity strengthening and learning in civil society. It calls for the mobilization of sustainable resources, for the enhancement of the structuring of civil society internationally, and strengthens CSO network-building. Forus produces relevant recommendations for donors based on inputs from its members, aiming to create more relevant and effective funding schemes for CSO capacity strengthening at the national and regional levels.

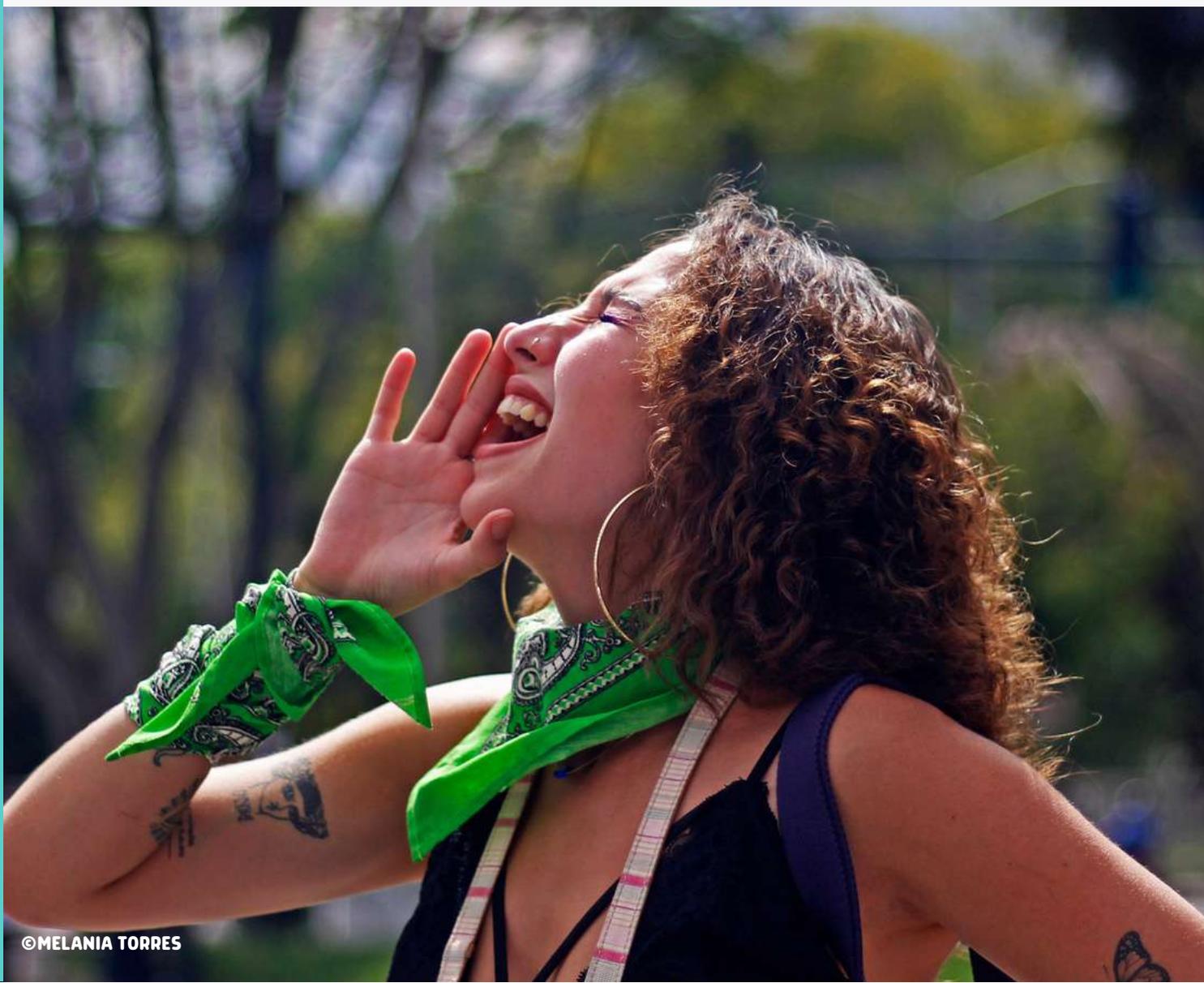
Since 2017, Forus has launched reports linking the capacity strengthening of civil society globally with the engagement that Member States in the UN have undertaken in the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These reports, such as the current report, aim to foster dialogue and drive positive change in capacity strengthening efforts for civil society worldwide while addressing systems of power and working together through true partnerships and mutual learning to achieve the SDGs.



HOW ADEQUATE ARE CURRENT APPROACHES TO CSO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING?

Intending to debate the adequacy of current approaches to CSO capacity strengthening, Forus established an Advisory Group on SDG 17 & CSO Capacity Strengthening. This group comprised 14 member platforms representing countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Canada, Cape Verde, Dominican Republic, Finland, Latvia, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Uganda, United Kingdom, and the United States, and one regional platform, the Asia Development Alliance.

Through virtual meetings held between November 2022 and May 2023, the Advisory Group deliberated on key issues and topics related to CSO capacity strengthening, contributing to the insights presented in this report. These inputs fed this report as part of reflections on CSO capacity strengthening. During these spaces for reflection, Forus members raised the concerns below about the adequacy of current approaches to CSO capacity strengthening.





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SHORT-TERMED, PROJECT FOCUSED AND PRESCRIPTIVE APPROACHES

Forus members observed that the current approach to CSO capacity strengthening related to the 2030 Agenda often originates from high-income countries and relies heavily on donor-driven, top-down models. Moreover, there is a lack of emphasis on triangular and South-South cooperation. Capacity strengthening efforts tend to be fragmented, short-term, and tied to specific projects or funding initiatives. When external donors support such initiatives, they often impose their preferences and overlook the invaluable local knowledge and experiences of communities and CSOs in the Global South.

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INADEQUATE MONITORING & MEASUREMENT

Forus members stressed the need for improved reporting by UN Member States regarding their collaboration with civil society at the national level, including the extent of CSO capacity strengthening provided. Currently, reliable data sources that quantify the amount of CSO capacity strengthening are scarce. Forus members suggested that spotlight reports from CSOs could serve as valuable sources of information on the nature and scale of CSO capacity strengthening at the national level. They also proposed that the UN system should play a role in monitoring and overseeing CSO capacity strengthening at national and regional levels. Recognizing the slow pace of global processes, members urged civil society to proactively shape the future direction of CSO capacity strengthening and its measurement, while advocating for new strategies beyond 2030.

MULTI-STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND DISAGGREGATED DATA

Members highlighted the importance of multi-stakeholder capacity strengthening to foster relationships and mutual understanding. However, they observed that current national and regional capacity strengthening efforts often fail to target multiple stakeholders effectively. Forus members emphasized the significance of peer exchanges among various stakeholder groups, including the private sector, civil society, academia, and national governments, to facilitate the exchange of perspectives and the development of common approaches. They called for the provision of disaggregated data to measure capacity strengthening received by each stakeholder group. Additionally, members advocated for the development of new indicators at global, regional, and national levels to assess CSO capacity strengthening.

While SDG Target 17.9 focuses on Official Development Assistance (ODA) allocation, members underscored that ODA alone does not encompass the entirety of capacity strengthening. They proposed establishing a clear link between CSO capacity strengthening and CSO's positive social and economic impacts, so that the first is perceived as the valuable investment that it is.

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CLARITY ABOUT THE RESPONSIBILITY OF FUNDING CSO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Forus members acknowledged that national governments should play a role in ensuring CSO capacity strengthening, but they also expressed concerns about the ambivalence of many governments towards this responsibility. Some governments may be motivated to limit opportunities for CSO capacity strengthening, as a strong civil society can question government decisions. In addition to proposing that the UN system should support and monitor the provision of CSO capacity strengthening, Forus members emphasized the importance of CSOs, particularly those from the Global South, being involved in planning and leading their own capacity strengthening efforts. They highlighted that CSOs possess in-country expertise and knowledge of local realities. Forus members suggested that many governments lack an understanding of how to amplify the capacities of civil society, emphasizing the need for CSOs to work closely with governments to provide guidance and advice.

THE NEED FOR FLEXIBLE APPROACHES

Forus members noted that traditional approaches to CSO capacity strengthening primarily cater to organizations familiar with the "logical framework approach" to project implementation. However, they recognized that some organizations are adopting alternative approaches and organizing themselves differently. Therefore, greater flexibility is required to allow for innovation and experimentation in capacity strengthening initiatives. Moreover, members emphasized the need to acknowledge the plurality and diversity of civil society worldwide, organized at various levels (community, national, regional, and thematic). Capacity strengthening approaches must be adaptable to address the distinct needs of different participating CSOs.

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CHAPTER 2: CSO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING IN THE VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS (VNRS)

AN OVERVIEW OF THE KEY FINDINGS & TRENDS IN CSO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING FROM PREVIOUS VNRS (2017-2021)

Since 2019, Forus has conducted an annual analysis to assess the extent to which Voluntary National Reviews (VNRS) presented by governments to the UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) include references to civil society organizations' capacity strengthening. The research indicates a gradual increase in the mention of capacity strengthening in VNRS over the years. In 2019, capacity strengthening was mentioned in 72% of the VNRS, rising to 82% in 2020, and further to 86% in 2021. It should be noted that the use of terms like "capacity-building," "capacity development," and "capacity strengthening" are used in the VNRS to encompass a wide range of aspects, from education to vocational training.

However, despite the majority of the VNRS acknowledging the crucial role of CSOs in implementing the 2030 Agenda, there is no evidence to suggest that any UN member states have adopted systematic and long-term efforts to strengthen the capacities of civil society for the implementation and monitoring of this agenda. It is essential for governments to be strongly encouraged to report on the progress they have made in providing capacity strengthening for civil society and other stakeholder groups in their VNRS to the UN HLPF.

Forus has consistently advocated for UN Member States to establish annual national targets for achieving capacity strengthening among various stakeholder groups involved in the monitoring and implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, the UN and its member states should collaborate to develop a clear and shared definition of capacity strengthening for reporting in VNRS. This definition should be flexible enough to accommodate different contexts while enabling measurement and comparison between countries and regions regarding their capacity strengthening initiatives related to the 2030 Agenda.

It is crucial that different stakeholder groups, including civil society organizations, actively participate in identifying their own capacity-strengthening needs for the monitoring and implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Highlighting key points from the various reports, the analysis of the 2017 and 2018 VNRs revealed that the capacity strengthening of national stakeholders, including civil society, seemed inconsistent and fragmented, with governments failing to fully fulfil their commitments outlined in Goal 17 of the 2030 Agenda to provide for capacity strengthening of civil society organisations.

Similar findings were reiterated in the following reports. The analysis of the 2019 VNRs emphasized the need for clearer definitions of capacity strengthening, explicitly linked to the 2030 Agenda and incorporating the transformative principles of the Preamble and Declaration. Recommendations were made to develop indicators for measuring progress and intensify capacity strengthening efforts at the regional level.

The analysis of the 2020 VNRs highlighted gaps in capacity strengthening related to the monitoring and implementation of the 2030 Agenda, with limited government support for strengthening civil society's capacity domestically. The reports stressed the importance of multi-level capacity strengthening and fostering common understandings and shared approaches among various stakeholder groups.

In the 2021 VNRs, gaps were identified regarding digitalization, education, gender equality, Leave No One Behind, and data collection. While the role of civil society was recognized, most countries lacked evidence of systematic and continuous approaches to capacity strengthening. The reports also underscored the digital divide and the limited use of digital tools by civil society organizations.



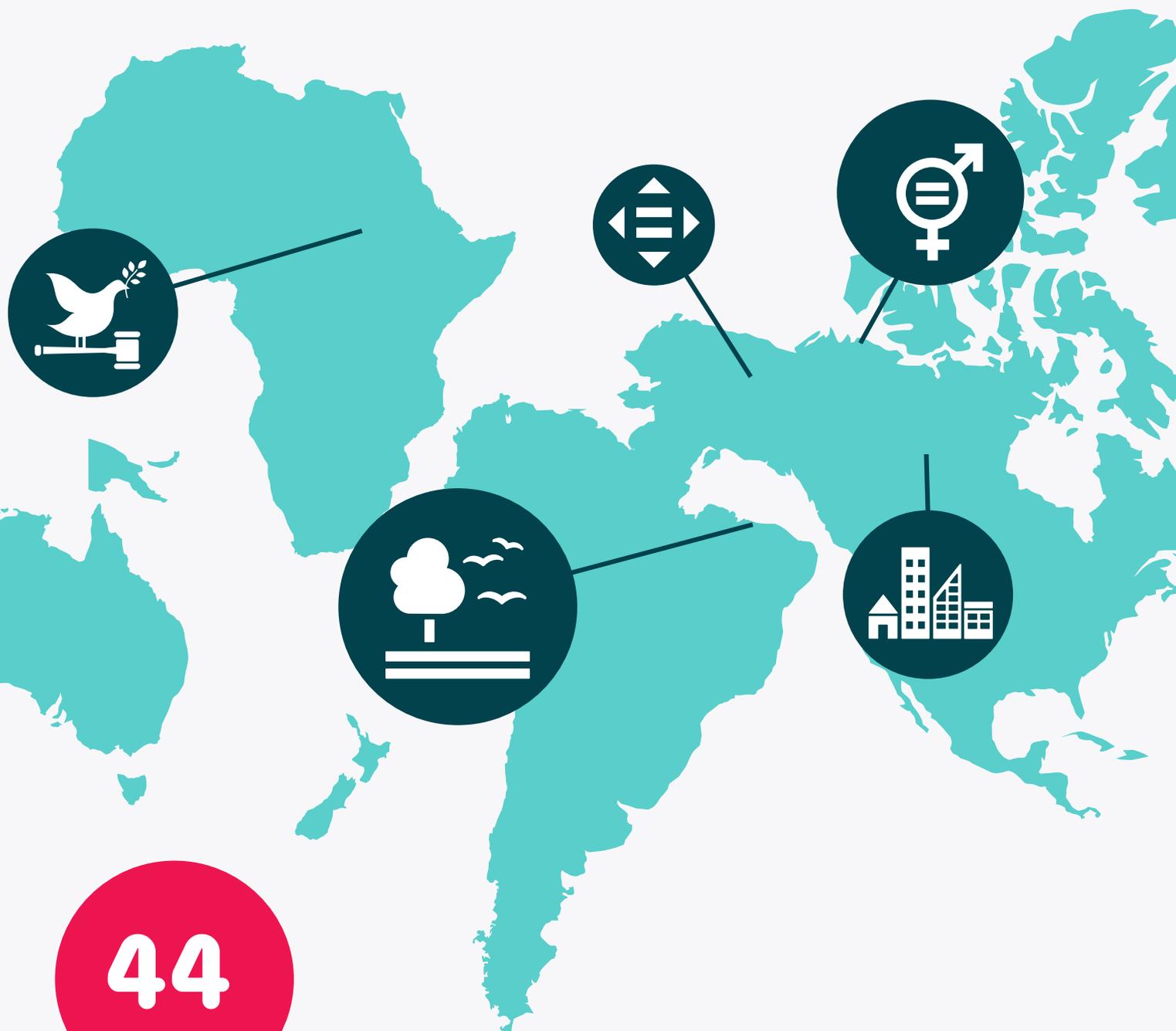
The analysis of the 2021 VNRs emphasized the ongoing lack of systematic and long-term efforts by countries to strengthen the capacities of civil society for the implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda. Few of the 2021 VNRs had dedicated sections for input from CSOs, which were often made available only in spotlight civil society reports independently produced by civil society organizations. Forus has highlighted in the analysis of the 2021 VNRs that no data is available on the levels of official support provided to CSOs for producing these valuable alternative reports.

In the 2021 VNRs, many reporting governments identified digitalization and increased internet access as key national planning priorities following the global pandemic. However, they also recognized the existing digital divide, particularly between urban and rural areas, as an obstacle to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. While most 2021 VNRs presented data on government actions and national policies addressing gender inequality, capacity strengthening programs targeting women typically focused on areas such as micro-credit management, vocational training, or political participation.

In summary, the key recommendations from the various reports include setting national targets, urging governments to report on their capacity strengthening progress, and establishing innovative funding mechanisms. International donors, Global North countries, and other bilateral donors should refrain from being prescriptive in their funding of CSO capacity strengthening. Instead, they should create conditions that promote greater autonomy for CSOs in planning, designing, and evaluating their own capacity strengthening programs and initiatives. Additionally, there is a need for a global architecture for capacity strengthening institutions and improved coordination among stakeholders.



KEY FINDINGS & TRENDS IN CSO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING FROM THE 2022 VNRS



44

**COUNTRIES
PRESENTED THEIR
VNRS TO THE UN
HLPF IN 2022.**

These countries included: Andorra, Argentina, Belarus, Botswana, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Dominica, El Salvador, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Greece, Grenada, Guinea Bissau, Italy, Jamaica, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lesotho, Liberia, Luxembourg, Malawi, Mali, Montenegro, Netherlands, Pakistan, Philippines, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Suriname, Switzerland, Togo, Tuvalu, United Arab Emirates & Uruguay. These countries' Voluntary National Reviews can be found online.⁸

KEY FINDINGS FROM 2022 VNRS:

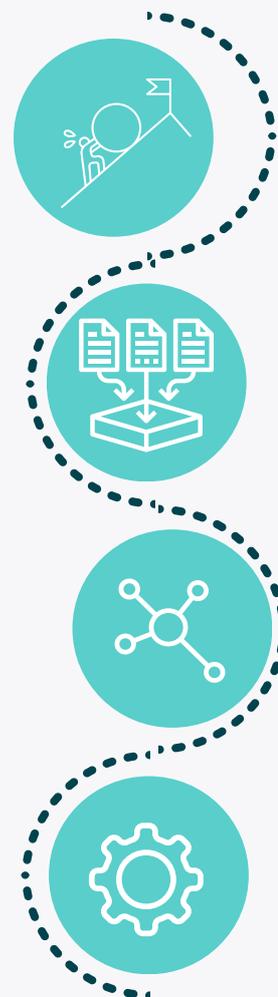
- According to the raw data available to Forus on SDG 17 reporting by the UN Member States, 38 out of the 44 VNRS presented to the UN HLPF in 2022 mentioned capacity strengthening efforts, needs or projects (also referred to in the VNRS as “capacity building”. This amounts to 86% of the countries that presented a VNR in 2022, which has remained stable compared to 86 % in 2021 and it is higher than in previous years, with 82% in 2020 and 72% in 2019. This represents an increasing trend over the past four-year period regarding UN MS reporting on capacity strengthening.
- The capacity strengthening referenced in the 2022 VNRS mainly referred to improving the human and technical capacities of public servants and institutional or State capacities. The topics mentioned included education, health, gender equality, and environmental protection.
- Of the 38 VNRS in 2022 that reported on capacity strengthening, 13 of them referred to CSOs by mentioning collaboration with civil society in capacity strengthening efforts linked to delivering on the SDGs, strengthening partnerships and multi-stakeholder mobilization.
- CSO capacity strengthening is not being provided to civil society to support the development of alternative civil society reports (which might also be called “spotlight” reports).
- Of the 13 countries mentioned above, 6 reported civil society as “beneficiaries” of capacity strengthening efforts, 2 reported on consultation with CSOs for the SDGs implementation, 3 reported on the role of CSOs as delivery agents of capacity strengthening initiatives, and 2 countries reported on the need to strengthen the coordination of and partnerships with civil society.



GAPS AND CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED IN 2022 VNRS

Regarding the challenges in implementing the 2030 Agenda:

- 13 of the 44 VNRS submitted in 2022 mentioned some level of capacity-related challenges, mostly human and institutional.
- 18 VNRS reported data challenges due to the lack of disaggregated data, as well as the production and availability of statistical data for monitoring and evaluating the progress in SDGs implementation.
- 2 VNRS mentioned difficulties with articulation between stakeholders, including civil society.
- 1 VNR mentioned that CSOs are constrained in terms of the required technical and financial resources to increase their contribution to national development and to the 2030 Agenda.



HOW IS CAPACITY STRENGTHENING MENTIONED IN THE VNRS?

The examples provided in this section are directly taken from the VNRS, which means that the information may not have been subject to any review or input from CSOs. Although it's important to acknowledge this limitation, these examples offer valuable insights into how CSO capacity strengthening is referenced in the VNRS. The examples are presented in three categories: CSOs as the target of capacity strengthening, CSO engagement in consultations or partnerships and CSOs as delivery agents of capacity strengthening.

In their respective VNRS, several countries highlight their efforts to enhance awareness and strengthen capacity among stakeholders, including CSOs. For instance, the government of Ethiopia puts forward that it has conducted training and workshops to mobilize sector ministries, government agencies, the private sector, CSOs, and development partners around the 2030 Agenda. In Grenada, the Spotlight Initiative is presented as having the aim to improve the capacity of national civil society organizations in designing and implementing violence prevention programs. Mali's government has mentioned the organization of a workshop involving representatives from the National Statistical System, civil society, the private sector, and partners to strengthen capacities and measure progress towards the SDGs. The government of the Netherlands has set up four grant instruments aimed at strengthening civil society in 2021, with a duration of five years and a budget of more than €1.2 billion.⁹ Under these programmes, local NGOs and Dutch civil society organizations team up to work on capacity strengthening projects designed to achieve the SDGs.

When it comes to CSO engagement in consultations or partnerships, in Equatorial Guinea there were workshops involving the government, private sector, civil society, academia, and United Nations agencies to raise awareness about the SDGs and gather feedback on sector contributions. In its VNR, the government of Sri Lanka recognizes the potential of a multi-stakeholder partnership that includes CSOs, in delivering on the SDGs. Gabon's VNR emphasizes the need to strengthen coordination among stakeholders, including ministerial departments, the private sector, civil society organizations, and technical and financial partners. Gambia presents in its VNRs consultations with stakeholders across local government areas, including CSOs as part of an outreach and sensitization strategy¹⁰ to gauge progress, identify challenges, and promote multi-sectoral coordination for effective SDG implementation.

Based on the information available in their VNRs, other countries have identified CSOs as delivery agents of capacity strengthening. Cameroon's VNR mentioned focusing on equipping local elected officials with tools to identify and integrate the SDGs into local development activities, with the support of CSOs and the UNDP. Jordan's government emphasizes in their VNR the partnerships with CSOs for implementing projects and awareness-raising activities. Suriname's VNR highlights the contribution of civil society organizations in providing technical and vocational skills to enter the labour market for youth that have dropped out of school.

The examples above from the VNRs illustrate how capacity strengthening is mentioned regarding CSOs. While these examples reflect the perspective of the respective Member States (which may not coincide with the perspectives of the country's CSOs), they provide insights into the approaches and initiatives described in the VNRs and the types of narratives used by different governments. UN Member States should strengthen multi-sectoral coordination within government, as well as with CSOs, development partners, the private sector and other stakeholders through continuous dialogue, consultations, and commitment to financial resources. There is a need for comprehensive engagement and collaboration among stakeholders, including CSOs, to effectively address the challenges and opportunities related to capacity strengthening in the context of the SDGs.



9 These are Power of Voices, Power of Women, the SRHR Partnership Fund and Women, Peace and Security. Source: [Kingdom of the Netherlands, "Report on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals," 2022.](#)

10 <https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/Gambia%20VNR%20Report%20%28Advance%20Copy%29.pdf>. (Gambia, 2022).



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“Shifting the power is essentially a new form of organizing to challenge the dominance of “white saviourism” and its attendant effects”

Moses Isooba, Executive Director, UNNGOF

CHAPTER 3: THE ROLE OF CSO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING IN PROMOTING POWER SHIFT, LOCALLY-LED DEVELOPMENT & DECOLONIZATION

In the pursuit of sustainable development, it is crucial to recognize and address the underlying power imbalances, historical legacies, and structural inequalities that shape our world. Three interconnected concepts play a vital role in transforming the development landscape: power shift, decolonization, and localization. These concepts challenge the status quo and call for a fundamental reconfiguration of power dynamics, knowledge production, and decision-making processes.

These concepts provide a roadmap for transforming the development sector, promoting shared responsibility, and ensuring that diverse perspectives and voices shape the agenda. Together, they offer the potential to reshape power relations, challenge neocolonial practices, and empower communities to lead their own sustainable development journeys.

The emergence of these three concepts in current debates represents a defining moment in international cooperation, with a clear calling for the need to redistribute power and ensure more equitable participation and influence in global development processes; the urge to reevaluate the historical and present-day colonial practices within the development sector; and the importance of local communities having ownership and control over development processes in their own spaces. These three concepts are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing.



TOWARDS POWER SHIFT IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In the international development sector, there is a growing recognition of the need for transformative reform to address power imbalances and move away from the traditional donor-recipient relationship. The concept of "power shift" has emerged as a means to foster equitable partnerships and challenge unequal power dynamics, particularly between civil society organizations from the Global North and Global South. However, some CSOs prefer alternative terms like "inclusion, equity, locally-led partnership, localization, internationalization, or anti-racism" to drive their change processes related to decision-making and structures.¹¹ Forus and its members believe that the capacity strengthening of civil society organizations can play a vital role in this process, which is why this chapter explores the notion of power shift and its implications for international development.

When discussing power, we refer to decision-making abilities through decision rights and various formal and informal mechanisms. In the international development context, power imbalances are often reinforced by unequal relationships between funders and/or international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and their partners in the Global South. This is because unequal power relationships can be perpetuated by existing or presumed differences in capacity. As a result, one set of actors can automatically be perceived as the "possessor of skills, knowledge, and resources," while the other set of actors is relegated to the role of passive recipients, with their own knowledge and expertise undervalued or disregarded. Unfortunately, this dynamic is often implicit in grant-making processes.



The #ShiftThePower movement, initiated by The Global Fund for Community Foundations in 2016, seeks to challenge the current aid system built on domination and control. Its objective is to address the existing imbalance where decision-making power is concentrated in INGOs, to the detriment of national or local CSOs in the Global South.

Achieving a power shift in international development requires transformative reform. This reform involves shifting decision-making power and establishing more equal relationships in development cooperation. It recognizes the invaluable knowledge held by stakeholders in the Global South and emphasizes placing their expertise at the center of initiatives concerning their societies and countries. A national platform in the Netherlands, Partos, argues that more power and resources need to be shifted to the people and places most affected by crisis and poverty.¹²

While well-known INGOs may receive the largest donations, they are not necessarily the ones with the best understanding of local situations or the knowledge of what change is needed and how it should be accomplished. Shifting power in international development requires a fundamental reimagining of existing power structures. It entails stakeholders creating plans to relinquish their current decision-making power, adopting a transition mindset, and implementing clear milestones for the transfer of power and resources to local organizations. “Direct implementation should be phased out in favour of a shift of resources to local organisations, and reserved only for exceptional situations at the request of local organisations”.¹³

Partnerships between civil society organizations from the Global North and Global South require careful attention to power dynamics and shared decision-making. It is crucial to recognize and respect the knowledge of local CSOs in the Global South.

11 [“Accelerating Inclusive Power Shift,” The International Civil Society Centre \(blog\), 2018, https://icscentre.org/our-work/global-governance-lab/.](https://icscentre.org/our-work/global-governance-lab/)

12 PARTOS.

13 [Peace Direct, “Time to Decolonise Aid,” 2021, 40, https://www.peacedirect.org/publications/timetodecoloniseaid/.](https://www.peacedirect.org/publications/timetodecoloniseaid/)



Their contribution, along with their systematic actions towards achieving the 2030 Agenda, needs greater recognition and the assurance of an enabling environment that allows them to move forward and fulfil their mission and purpose. Individuals from the Global North must be mindful of their engagement practices, displaying empathy, respect, and humility. Strengthening a supportive civil society infrastructure, including local infrastructure organizations, can enhance the effectiveness of partnerships and enable local organizations to flourish.

Capacity strengthening plays a crucial role as a tool for power shift in international development. It serves as a means to ensure that no one is left behind, promoting inclusivity in the development processes. By strengthening the capacities of individuals, organizations, and communities, it creates the conditions for them to drive social change from within. Capacity strengthening can embrace flexible processes, promote accountability, and ensure meaningful participation.

Horizontal collaboration, sharing success cases, and fostering formal and informal sharing practices are vital. Learning through sharing similar experiences and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange strengthens collective support and sharing among CSOs. Recognizing that project management standards and logic were created by the Global North, the design of the interventions and the definitions of impact should be defined by the communities most affected by the action. Recognizing that knowledge is also power, when responding to training requests, individuals from all backgrounds can be equipped with additional knowledge that will further inform decision-making.

“How partnerships are formed and sustained is an important imperative. (...) Recognizing and respecting, indigenous knowledge and capacities, especially the community trust and assets that southern civil society organisations bring to the table will enhance the north-south partnership now and in the future. The staff of northern-based civil society organisations must work on the arrogance that comes with their engagement with their southern colleagues. They must always remember the ubuntu spirit “I am because we are”

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Oyebisi, B. Oluseyi, NNNGO - Nigeria Network of NGOs.



14 Babatunde Oluseyi, “I Am Because We Are,” CONCORD (blog), 2022, <https://concordeurope.org/2022/11/28/i-am-because-we-are/>.

DECOLONIZING INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION BY OVERCOMING COLONIAL POWER DYNAMICS

Decolonization is a crucial process for shifting power dynamics between high-income countries and the global majority. While it might be initially associated with the process of independence of former colonies, in this report it is referred to as the colonial attitudes that remain deeply embedded in languages, thoughts, relationships, and economic and social inequalities over time. According to the series of dialogues organized by Partos, decolonization refers to “a complex, all-encompassing transformation: a cultural shift that reveals and challenges systemic injustices and mindsets that are rooted in colonial history”.¹⁵

Despite the existence of universal principles of shared responsibility in the 2030 Agenda, international frameworks have not effectively transformed traditional donor-recipient dynamics and power relations in the development sector. Colonialism has significantly influenced the perspectives and positions of development actors from the Global South and the Global North, perpetuating power imbalances. Achieving genuine decolonization necessitates a shift in mindset and the recognition of the value of local knowledge.

“Decolonizing the aid system is a necessity if we are to shift global power dynamics and ensure the sustainability of development, humanitarian aid and peacebuilding projects. It is not enough to localize projects (...) if non-White, non-Western individuals do not hold structural power, the system will simply continue replicating itself, skewing global power dynamics ever more in favour of the Global North”.¹⁶

Moses Isooba, Executive Director, UNNGOF



¹⁵ PARTOS, “Decolonisation of Development Cooperation Part 1 - Tracing the Colonial Roots of Development Cooperation: A Brief History,” *Decolonisation of Development Cooperation* (PARTOS, 2022), <https://www.partos.nl/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Partos-future-brief-decolonisation-part-1.pdf>.

¹⁶ Peace Direct, “Time to Decolonise Aid,” 2021, 37, <https://www.peacedirect.org/publications/timetodecoloniseaid/>.



AMITI
NEXT?

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“There is a need for a conscious and deliberate departure from placing a high premium on “ivory tower” knowledge vis-a viz “ebony tower” knowledge”

Moses Isooba, Executive Director, UNNGOF

The decolonization project goes beyond abstract concepts and holds significant political implications.¹⁷ Various aspects of international cooperation and the aid system require decolonization. For instance, the use of imagery and language in communication strategies, recruitment practices, the valuation of local knowledge, and the imposition of bureaucratic processes in funding schemes all need to be examined.

The aid system itself, with its technocratic terminology and foreign normative agenda,¹⁸ presents challenges to shared understanding and perpetuates unequal power dynamics. Some INGOs still employ communication strategies that reflect colonial influences, reinforcing dehumanizing and victimizing representations for fundraising purposes and perpetuating stereotypes. This calls for a reevaluation of language, adopting inclusive terminologies, and eliminating inappropriate terms that imply any level of inferiority, such as "beneficiaries." Recruitment practices should also be reviewed to ensure fairness and avoid all kinds of biases.

Decolonizing the aid system is crucial for shifting global power dynamics and ensuring the sustainability of development, humanitarian aid, and peacebuilding projects. Local knowledge, leadership, and context-specific innovation must be recognized, valued, and effectively mobilized. Promoting the decolonization of knowledge entails questioning who can "build capacity" and creating spaces for horizontal connections and mutual learning that promote the expertise of local communities. Some prefer the concept of "capacity sharing" to best convey the idea of equal partnerships in project implementation.

True ownership of development processes can only be achieved if it is ensured from the very beginning. This requires that decision-making regarding capacity strengthening, including setting goals, determining methodologies, assigning responsibilities, implementing actions, allocating funding, and distributing resources, is entrusted to the individuals and groups directly affected by it. Genuine participation entails having agency and influence in the decision-making process.



Furthermore, the funding system continues to favour organizations from the Global North, and compliance systems within the sector need decolonization. These systems often burden local organizations with bureaucratic processes and assumptions of inherent risk, hindering their ability to respond promptly to community needs. Exclusion from funding due to compliance paperwork further limits potential partnerships. It is unfair to expect organizations in the global South to implement instruments without exercising their agency.

Instead, adopting participatory grant-making practices can enable CSOs from the Global South to influence the process and decision-making regarding the "rules of the game.". Donors and INGOs need to reconceptualise their relationships with partners in the global majority. It is essential to recognize the invaluable knowledge of these stakeholders, putting their expertise at the center of initiatives concerning their own societies and countries. Decolonizing the aid system is an urgent and necessary step towards dismantling colonial structures and achieving equitable power relations.

By addressing the challenges mentioned above and mobilizing local knowledge and leadership, we can foster more sustainable and just approaches to international cooperation. Genuine partnerships, based on mutual respect and shared decision-making, are essential in working towards a truly decolonized aid system that upholds dignity for all.



17 Volau, "Decolonization - Self Determination."

18 Moses Isooba, "Decolonizing Aid: The Use of Language and Lexicon," 1, accessed June 19, 2023, https://www.mission-21.org/fileadmin/Webseite_Mission_21/Veranstaltungen/2022/Summerschool22/Praesentationen/3_Moses_Isooba_Decolonizing_Aid_EN.pdf.

AMPLIFYING LOCAL VOICES: THE ROLE OF LOCALIZATION IN CENTERING COMMUNITIES AND THEIR PERSPECTIVES

Localization is a crucial pillar of sustainable development, emphasizing the importance of local communities having ownership and control over processes occurring in their own spaces. It involves recognizing the value of assets within communities and elevating the voices of community representatives in development processes. Localization requires a shift in operating systems and organizational cultures for donors, as they increasingly prioritize locally-led and locally-driven development.

There is a growing consensus on the significance of locally produced knowledge, expertise, and lived experience of people and communities in driving real change in development cooperation. This means that partners from the Global North should not impose frameworks or dictate actions to communities in the global majority. Decision-making power should lie with the communities most affected by any initiative.

According to a briefing paper from the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), the process of localization encompasses various interpretations, including providing direct funding to existing national and local actors, empowering affected people to act as humanitarian actors themselves, increasing decision-making power at the local level, linking international action to local realities, investing in partner capacities, promoting participation in coordination mechanisms, and reducing administrative barriers to accessing international funds.

Localization goes beyond simply replacing international actors or systems with local equivalents; it presents an opportunity to critically examine and improve the structure and functionality of the entire humanitarian system.

This same briefing paper suggests that "this diversity of interpretations may explain the widespread acceptance of localization and its continued relevance as a process of change in the humanitarian sector. Importantly, it shows that to most humanitarian actors, localization is more than simply replacing international actors or systems with local or national equivalents. Instead, localization creates an opportunity to critically examine and improve the structure and functionality of the entire humanitarian system".¹⁹

In terms of capacity strengthening, it is crucial to prioritize the autonomy of local CSOs in determining their own learning agenda. Capacity strengthening initiatives should acknowledge and leverage existing capacities, valuing local knowledge from the outset. Regular opportunities for capacity strengthening are essential for CSOs, especially local ones, as they enhance their ability to assume impactful roles within their unique contexts.

“CSO capacity strengthening makes CSOs even more capable of interacting with local power, able to switch between working with powerless communities and speaking to powerful ones, and to become a “must talk to” actor in development processes.”

Lina Paola Lara, Advocacy Officer, CCONG (Colombia)



Localization and capacity strengthening are key components of global commitments endorsed at the World Humanitarian Summit, such as the Agenda for Humanity, the Grand Bargain, and the Charter for Change. Some local and national actors believe that capacity strengthening should be independent of partnerships. They emphasize the importance of this support, particularly in humanitarian action.



“In recent years there has been a push to recognize the colonial power dynamics between the UK and the communities that it works with. It is now recognized that we should value the locally produced knowledge, expertise and lived experience of people and communities. While there is a role for funders to provide support and resources for communities to help them build their own capacity, this must not involve partners from high-income countries telling communities in low- and middle-income countries what to do!”²⁰

Greater ownership and control by local organizations ensure that programs can be embedded effectively and sustainably in the local context. The pathways, speed and milestones of localization in each country will look quite different depending on the context. In this same report, Bond recommends that the UK government should prioritize transformational partnerships with its partner countries, provide long-term, flexible, core funding and have local actors involved in the decisions that affect them and their communities.

¹⁹ ICVA, “LOCALIZATION EXAMINED: An ICVA Briefing Paper,” 2018, 5, <https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2021/08/ICVA-Localization-Examined-Briefing-Paper.pdf>.

²⁰ BOND, “SDG 17: Progress, Gaps and Recommendations for the UK” (UK, 2022), <https://www.bond.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/sdg17.pdf>.

Peace Direct calls upon international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to re-evaluate partnerships with local organizations, moving away from seeking short-term implementing partners and establishing long-term strategic partnerships not bound by project cycles.²¹ Multi-stakeholder collaboration is at the heart of all four national localisation frameworks (Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria and South Sudan) outlined by Peace Direct in this publication, and partnerships between local or national actors and international actors are key pathways to strengthening the role of national actors in humanitarian action.

Among other organisations, Peace Direct also proposes that INGOs should consider putting in place clear milestones for the transfer of power and resources to local organizations. It calls for direct implementation to be phased out in favour of a shift of resources to local organizations and to be reserved only for exceptional situations at the request of local organizations.



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21 [Peace Direct, "Time to Decolonise Aid."](#)



“Localization must pivot on the deployment of local resources, local leadership, local systems, local learning and most fundamentally local design and implementation of any intervention”

Moses Isooba, Executive Director - UNNGOF (Uganda)

LOCALIZATION IN THE 2022 VNRS

Out of the three concepts presented in this chapter, the only one that can be found in the Voluntary National Reviews in 2022 is localization as presented below:



- 52% of countries (23 out of 44 countries) that presented their VNRs mention localization of the SDGs and the inclusion of local and regional actors in the implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda.



- The localization reported on in the 2022 VNRs referred to the territorialization of the SDGs at the local government and public sector level, steering implementation of the SDGs across all sectors, and engaging local actors and authorities in the coordination and implementation of the SDGs.



- Out of the 23 countries that mentioned localization, 4 referred to the inclusion of different stakeholders in the 2030 Agenda implementation, including CSOs and/or civil society.



The following examples from the VNRs provide insights into how localization is referenced, but it's important to note that they are directly quoted (i.e. may lack independent verification or input from CSOs). Pakistan's VNR highlights the establishment of frameworks at national and provincial levels, emphasizing the alignment of SDGs with local needs and capacities while fostering partnerships with diverse stakeholders. Kazakhstan's VNR emphasizes the commitment to localization through national projects and regional programs, including training seminars for local executive agencies. The VNR also recognizes the role of the private sector and civil society in localizing the SDGs. Jordan's VNR emphasizes the involvement of stakeholders from civil society, youth, academia, and the private sector, with specific roles driving the localization process. For instance, municipal and governance councils are expected to develop developmental plans linked to the SDGs. Ethiopia's VNR mentions the engagement of development partners and CSOs in implementing flagship multi-sectoral programs. However, to gain a comprehensive understanding of localization efforts in the above-mentioned countries, it is essential to gather additional perspectives from CSOs and other stakeholders.

CHAPTER 4: HOW SHOULD CSO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING BE FUNDED?

TRANSFORMING THE CSO FUNDING LANDSCAPE: EXPLORING ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

Any attempts to evaluate the adequacy of current funding systems for CSO capacity strengthening inherently raise wider questions about the adequacy and long-term sustainability of the international Financing for Development (FfD) system:

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“Our current system of development co-operation is simply not meeting the scale of this challenge. Despite some positive developments, including the issuance of USD 650 billion in Special Drawing Rights, developing economies face unsustainable debt burdens and a liquidity crisis. Official development assistance (ODA) is deeply inadequate and has fallen behind commitments made decades ago. While ODA to the most vulnerable countries has grown since the pandemic, this increase has been driven overwhelmingly by loans. The total external debt service of least developed countries has more than tripled in the last ten years and is projected to reach USD 43 billion for 2022. Under such conditions, loans can be counterproductive and raise the risk of debt distress, undermining the ability of countries to invest in long term sustainable development and resilience. Mobilizing more ODA and requiring that loans be made with greater concessionality are steps in the right direction. But at a time of asymmetric vulnerabilities, we must also coordinate efforts to invest globally and protect locally, while ensuring that ODA is not redirected away from long-term development needs. We need to enhance strategic planning and channel more ex ante financing to resilience-building, to protect vulnerable countries and people that are most exposed to the adverse effects of shocks that threaten lives and livelihoods. These efforts must be complemented by a coordinated approach to providing immediate debt relief and restructuring.”²²

There is a clear need for broader systemic reform of the international financing for development architecture and processes, extending beyond the necessary changes in funding systems for CSO capacity strengthening. While this report primarily focuses on reimagining and transforming the financing of CSO capacity strengthening, it acknowledges the existence of numerous established critiques of the wider CSO funding system. Consequently, the report will begin by providing a brief overview of these critiques before delving into the fundamental transformation of CSO capacity strengthening financing.

²² The OECD Forum Network, “In My View: Development Co-Operation Must Tackle Complex Challenges Better and Protect the Most Vulnerable,” The OECD Forum Network, 2023, <http://www.oecd-forum.org/posts/in-my-view-development-co-operation-must-tackle-complex-challenges-better-and-protect-the-most-vulnerable>.

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The 2021 OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Recommendation on an Enabling Environment for Civil Society²³ emphasizes the importance of providing financial support to a range of civil society actors. Member States of the OECD DAC are encouraged to recognize civil society actors as independent development and humanitarian actors in their own right. Additionally, they are urged to support civil society actors as implementing partners, especially those representing marginalized or vulnerable groups. To achieve this, the Recommendation suggests increasing the availability of flexible and predictable support, core support, and/or programme-based support, whenever appropriate and feasible.

However, despite positive official commitments over recent decades to improve CSO funding mechanisms, civil society globally has become increasingly critical of them, including those aimed at the capacity strengthening of CSOs.



23 OECD, "DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-Operation and Humanitarian Assistance OECD/LEGAL/5021," 2021, <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-5021>.

According to the 2021 report by the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC), the funding environment in Latin America primarily relies on project grants, resulting in limited core funding for CSOs. This situation leaves CSOs without adequate resources for their overall strengthening and hinders sectoral development. The report highlights the need for donors to shift their approach and consider strengthening the capacity of the overall "CSO ecosystems" rather than focusing solely on individual CSOs. To achieve this, it proposes the establishment of resource organizations dedicated to enhancing the capacities of CSOs at national and regional levels.

Partos, the Dutch membership body for organisations working in international development, has put forward a proposal urging funders to shift their focus from project-based funding to investing in the capacity and sustainability of CSOs. It emphasizes the importance of fostering a strong and vibrant civil society by supporting CSOs directly. In a their recent paper,²⁵ Partos raises concerns about the power dynamics in development partnerships, describing how donors from the Global North continue to dominate decision-making processes, including formulating funding proposals, setting timelines, and determining monitoring and evaluation criteria. Meanwhile, organizations from the global majority often have limited decision-making power and minimal influence in these partnerships. Partos calls for the decolonization of funding flows through the adoption of participatory approaches to grant-making. This shift is seen as a promising decolonial alternative to traditional funding practices and a step towards dismantling power imbalances in the funding process.

Critics of current funding modalities have emphasized the need for donors to adopt funding approaches that are less rigid, more flexible, and long-term in their support for CSOs. They propose that funders prioritize mutual accountability among all partners involved in partnerships, placing emphasis on learning and impact. This entails a shift away from an excessive focus on detailed regulations and instead encourages an environment that fosters learning, creativity, and adaptability. By promoting a more flexible and learning-oriented approach, funders can better support CSOs in effectively utilizing financial and non-financial resources to achieve their objectives and generate meaningful impact, encouraging creativity and adaptability.

"Relations in aid systems typically rely on time-bound units where resource providers' time frames, cycles and durations dominate. Examples are deadlines for competitive bidding; pre-determined funding and reporting cycles; pre-planned assessments of performance; timing of financial accounting and payments. This design imposes a form of discipline and pressure that can work against relational fairness, sensitivity to context and effectiveness of development efforts".²⁶



24 INTRAC and Dr E. Kumi, Dr K. Bandyopadhyay & P. Collada, "Landscape Analysis of CSO Capacity Strengthening Efforts in the Global South."

25 PARTOS, "Future Brief: Decolonisation of the development sector," 2022, <https://www.partos.nl/publicatie/tracing-the-colonial-roots-of-development-cooperation-a-brief-history/>.

Peace Direct, which is an international charity, has called on donors to embrace the uncertainty, complexity and even “messiness” inherent in humanitarian responses and to move away from rigid funding requirements that prioritize perfect proposals adhering to strict templates and timelines.²⁷ Instead, they advocate for the development of alternative funding modalities and systems, such as community philanthropy, that better reflect the realities in a humanitarian context.

Peace Direct²⁸ also emphasizes the importance of transparency and accountability in funding processes, highlighting the need for meaningful inclusion and involvement of beneficiaries in decision-making. It argues against the imposition of ideas without the active participation of local communities. Current donor requirements often focus on financial reporting and audits. To decolonize funding approaches, it suggests that donors and local partners should agree on essential factors for demonstrating accountability, potentially involving local auditors and engaging the participating community. Peace Direct proposes that accountability should be defined in terms of the “impact on the community, as judged by the community,” shifting the focus from strict financial measures to a more holistic assessment of the positive change achieved from the community's perspective.



26 PARTOS, “Dream Paper: Shift the Power,” 2022, <https://www.partos.nl/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Partos-Dreampaper-Shift-the-Power-v7.pdf>.

27 Catherine Martha Agwang in [Peace Direct, “Time to Decolonise Aid.”](#)

28 [Peace Direct](#).

“Donors require complex M&E frameworks, impose required indicators, sometimes accompanied by external evaluations carried out by consultants. To decolonize, donors, local partners and participating communities need to agree on how the success of the project will be measured, what will be needed to demonstrate that, and allow for that to change over time as the community learns and evolves”

Lorina McAdam in Peace direct.²⁹



INTRAC also emphasizes the importance of donor flexibility in funding modalities, encouraging CSOs and resource organizations to embrace risk-taking and experimentation as a means of fostering organizational learning. By accepting the possibility of “failure”, donors create an environment conducive to innovative and adaptable funding approaches.

Building upon this notion, Peace Direct suggests that embracing the potential for program failure opens doors to exploring innovative and flexible funding methods. For instance, funders can take on administrative burdens or adopt context-specific measures of success. Various efforts and examples have emerged in this realm, including collaborative “pooling funds to mitigate risks, direct funding, PEER funding models, the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, setting targets for the provision of unrestricted funding for local organizations, adapting due diligence requirements for local organizations, and modifying eligibility criteria that give preferential treatment to Western INGOs”.³⁰

The tied nature of part of the procurement contracts of the Official Development Assistance (ODA) raises concerns since it tends to favour companies from donor countries. In addition, a significant portion of development funding is allocated to organizations based in the Global North, disproportionately to organizations in the Global South. There is a persistence of old colonial ties in funding, with donor governments providing a larger share of ODA to former colonies compared to other countries.

To address these issues, Partos advocates for a shift in funding practices, emphasizing the importance of funding organizations instead of projects. They urge funders to invest in the capacity and sustainability of CSOs to foster the growth of a strong and vibrant civil society. Partos also emphasizes the importance of locally-led development. While funding is often more readily available to international NGOs (INGOs) and large institutions, valuable resources exist within communities and community-based organizations (CBOs) that possess deep knowledge of their realities, relationships, and the most effective ways to drive positive change. Partos proposes a shift in development mindsets towards valuing resources over funds as the primary driver of change. This shift would foster a more equitable partnership dynamic and recognize the vital role of communities in the development process.

²⁹ [Peace Direct.](#)

³⁰ [Peace Direct, 39.](#)

Partos³¹ claims, and Forus' shares this view, that shifting the power requires an approach that prioritizes people and is led by the communities. This would mean actively listening to the voices of the community and recognizing its importance in ensuring the quality and effectiveness of the change process. By adopting this approach, there would be a greater emphasis on mobilizing and valuing resources within the community, extending beyond financial resources. Experience shows that community philanthropy, where community resources are actively mobilized for social change, foster trust-building, confidence, changing accountability dynamics and constituency building. It also promotes a sense of ownership and mutual accountability by considering how people come together, how they are engaged, treated, and made to feel throughout the process.

Coordination SUD, a member of Forus and the national coordination body for French international solidarity NGOs, has published a paper advocating for the "CSO right of initiative" as a means of providing CSOs with new funding opportunities untied to specific projects and promoting innovation.

“The right of initiative is a form of commitment that aims to recognize the free possibility of action of CSOs. It is a lever to promote alternatives not yet explored or outside predefined frameworks. The partnership between civil society and public authorities goes beyond that of simple “service provision”. CSOs, like all associations, are spaces for innovation, experimentation, spaces for democratic life that need support for their activities, in various forms”.³²

According to Coordination Sud, the concept of the right of initiative for CSOs aligns with the principles of freedom of association enshrined in the French law of 1901, which enables citizens to form associations to pursue actions in the public interest. Under this law, an association is defined as an agreement where two or more individuals come together in a lasting manner to combine their knowledge or activities for a purpose other than sharing profits. This legal framework enables citizens to form associations that serve the common good and pursue objectives such as social, cultural, educational, or humanitarian causes.

At the international level, Coordination Sud claims that the notion of the CSO right of initiative emerged in response to the shortcomings of the aid system and development policies in the 1990s. “This led to the establishment of new guiding principles for action in international forums such as the Paris Declaration (2005), the Accra High-Level Forum (2008), and the Istanbul Principles (2015)”³³. These principles aimed to enhance the role and contributions of CSOs and foster an enabling environment for them. Coordination Sud argues that all countries, therefore, agreed to promote financial support models for CSOs that strengthen their development contributions.³⁴

Supporting the right of initiative means supporting associative projects defined by CSOs themselves, and therefore strengthening their mission. The right of initiative defends the independence and autonomy of civil society organizations. Combined with solid and predictable funding, it has a structuring impact on CSOs (associative projects, local national and international networks). By being part of long-term support for CSOs, the right of initiative makes it possible to cushion the effects of any disruption of cooperation strategies linked to political changes and thus to ensure continuity of CSO actions”.³⁵

31 PARTOS, “Dream Paper: Shift the Power.”

32 COORDINATION SUD, “SUPPORTING THE RIGHT OF INITIATIVE OF CSOS,” 2023, 2, <https://www.coordinationsud.org/wp-content/uploads/Supporting-Right-Initiative-CSO.pdf>.

33 COORDINATION SUD, 4.

34 COORDINATION SUD, “SUPPORTING THE RIGHT OF INITIATIVE OF CSOS.”

35 COORDINATION SUD, 11.

FORUS ON HOW CSO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING SHOULD BE FUNDED

In preparation for this report, Forus facilitated the formation of an Advisory Group consisting of 14 members representing various organizations within the Forus network. The purpose of this group was to engage in in-depth discussions on critical matters linked to CSO capacity strengthening. Throughout these deliberations, the Advisory Group worked collaboratively to formulate recommendations aimed at transforming the existing funding system for CSO capacity strengthening. Their valuable insights and contributions have greatly informed the content of this section, which presents a summary of the significant issues and concerns emphasized by the participating members of the Forus Advisory Group.

EXPLORING FUNDING SOURCES FOR CSO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING AND ITS RISKS

A consensus emerged from the Advisory Group members on the challenges faced by civil society in securing funding for their capacity strengthening, particularly in countries with democratic deficits. CSOs encounter difficulties in obtaining financial support especially if they have been publicly critical of government decisions or actions. To address these concerns, participants proposed that primary funding for CSOs should originate from dedicated budgets for CSO capacity strengthening at the national level. They emphasized the need for a comprehensive public policy on CSO strengthening at the national level, and since media and political parties receive this type of dedicated national funding, they defended that development partners such as CSOs be funded in a similar manner.

However, it was crucially noted that regardless of funding source, the independence of CSOs must be safeguarded, and transparent rules and procedures should govern the allocation and utilization of funds. Forus members raised concerns about the risks associated with an overreliance on government funding for CSO capacity strengthening. They pointed out the tendency of some governments to fund “government-organized non-governmental” organizations that avoid criticizing the government and instead prioritize service delivery. It was acknowledged that many governments in the global majority are not inclined to financially support CSOs advocating for a rights-based agenda, thereby limiting the growth of such CSOs.

Therefore, while national governments should play a role in funding CSO capacity strengthening, regional and global funding mechanisms should also be established. Organizations such as the OECD and the UN, which have a strong interest in democracy, were mentioned as potential regional and global actors to support the capacity strengthening of civil society worldwide. The concept of a Global Fund for CSO capacity strengthening, aligned with the operationalization of SDG 17 and its target, garnered support as a potential stable source of funding, reducing dependence on national governments and institutions.

CHALLENGES OF PROJECT-BASED FUNDING FOR CSO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

During the debates, members expressed frustration with the project-based nature of CSO funding, which they believe hinders longer-term planning within the sector. They emphasized the pressure created by project cycles of 2 years, 3 years, or 5 years, as they are often required to achieve predefined results within those timeframes. Participants in the Advisory Group highlighted how project funding, tied to concrete outcomes, limits innovation, experimentation, and the acceptance of failure within projects. They noted the lack of provisions in project budgets for innovation, experimentation, and CSO capacity strengthening, and urged international donors and funding agencies to include these as standard budget lines in their development funding.

Project-related funding approach leads to a "start-stop" pattern, creating gaps in knowledge transfer processes and resulting in the loss of valuable staff and expertise. The predominant project-based approach in the global majority obliges CSOs in the Global South to conform to external criteria and models developed by donor countries and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs).

There was a general consensus among participants of the Advisory Group on the urgent need for permanent core funding for CSOs in addition to project funding, in order to address the sector's precariousness. This core funding would enable the continuous strengthening of CSOs' organizational capacities and contribute to their long-term technical and financial sustainability, among other benefits.



RECOGNIZING THE PUBLIC INTEREST ROLE OF CSOS

Participants in the Advisory Group emphasized the need for governments and other actors to recognize the value brought by civil society, particularly organized civil society organizations (CSOs), in the overall governance within their countries. Despite often operating with limited resources, CSOs play a significant role in development. However, their work and positive impacts on society are not always acknowledged. Recognition is often associated with their involvement in traditional service delivery, overlooking their other important public interest functions, such as holding governments accountable and advocating for public policies for the marginalized and excluded groups.

To effectively convey their public interest role, organized civil society needs to develop new narratives that highlight the valuable work they carry out in society. CSOs require fresh language and narratives to engage with the external audience, donors and other development actors. It is crucial for them to measure, describe, and communicate the social, environmental, and economic impacts of their work, establishing strong connections between their activities and the broader public interest. However, this undertaking requires a significant investment of time and resources.

In Colombia, for instance, CCONG, the national CSO platform and a Forus member, is leading a Transparency Initiative for the CSO sector to enhance its ability to measure and communicate the positive impacts of its work to society. In some countries, such as Finland, there are institutions established to defend and promote the interests of civil society, such as the National Council for Civil Society, which is linked to the Ministry of Justice.

Despite public advocacy being a vital function of organized civil society, participants emphasized the challenge CSOs face in securing funding for their advocacy activities and for strengthening their advocacy capacities. It is evident that there is a need for greater recognition and understanding of the public interest role of CSOs by the different stakeholders. Securing adequate funding would enhance CSOs' ability to contribute to positive social change and promote the interests of marginalized and excluded groups.

“If the important public interest function of CSOs were better understood by the general public, CSO funding from government sources would be more likely to be perceived as an essential investment rather than as an expense or a financial burden on society”

Lina Paola Lara, Advocacy Officer, CCONG Colombia



STRENGTHENING CSO ECOSYSTEMS AND NETWORKING FOR ENHANCED IMPACT

Participants in the Advisory Group have recognized the importance of not only providing core funding for individual CSOs but also investing in broader "CSO ecosystems" that support and amplify their work. These ecosystems include sharing platforms, networks, resource hubs, training centers, research institutes, and professional associations, among others. Strengthening these ecosystems should be a legitimate funding objective to enhance the overall capacity and effectiveness of civil society.

There is a lack of funding for networking activities between domestic CSO networks, between CSO networks and other key sectors such as the private sector and academia as well as CSO networks and their counterparts in other countries. There is a need for intentional networking to facilitate coordination and collaboration at multiple levels. This kind of multi-level coordination is crucial for civil society to effectively engage in global policy frameworks like the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Climate Agreement, and to connect grassroots voices with regional and global decision-making processes.

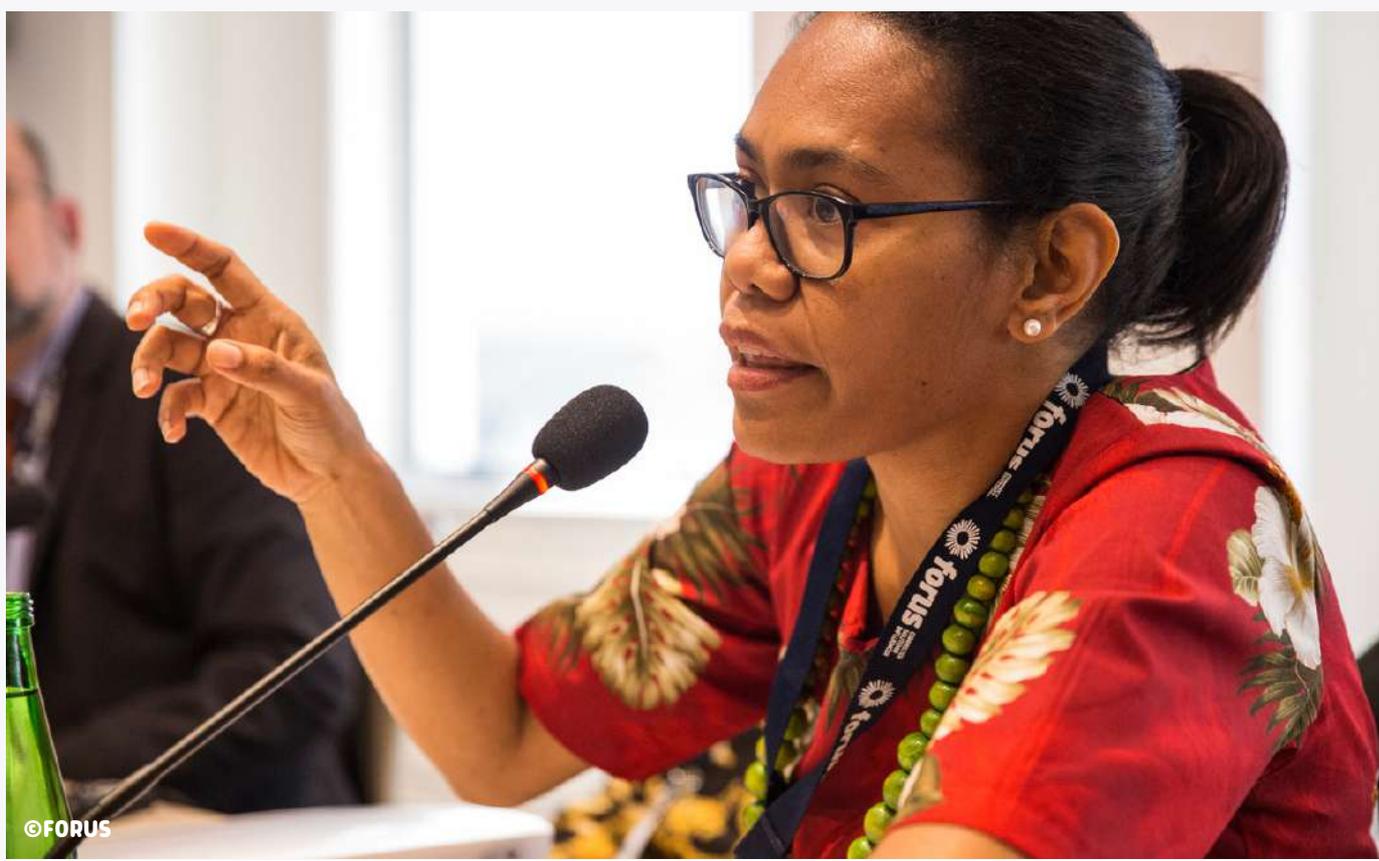
Furthermore, participants suggested that funding for CSOs could also support activities aimed at promoting civic space and creating more enabling environments for civil society to operate. This recognizes the importance of protecting and expanding the space for CSOs to freely carry out their work and engage in advocacy and public participation. Advisory Group participants recognize that an overall investment in CSO ecosystems, facilitating networking, and supporting an enabling environment are essential elements for strengthening civil society's impact and influence.



CONSIDERATIONS IN SECURING CSO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING FUNDING FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR AND PHILANTHROPIC FOUNDATIONS

Participants in the Advisory Group engaged in a thoughtful discussion regarding the potential for CSO capacity strengthening funding from the private sector and philanthropic foundations. However, scepticism emerged regarding the extent to which some actors, in particular from the private sector, would genuinely support the transformative and systemic changes that CSOs aspire to achieve in societies and economies. Central to these concerns was the alignment of interests and values, particularly considering the political nature of CSO requests and overall work, which may diverge from the priorities of some private stakeholders. It was highlighted that some private sector companies establish philanthropic foundations primarily to advance their own interests, making them less suitable as a reliable funding source for civil society.

CSOs consistently advocate for increased accountability in the private sector and champion rights-based agendas. Therefore, relying solely on the private sector or philanthropic foundations for CSO capacity strengthening funding could present dilemmas if these actors perceive a potential long-term threat to their own interests. Additionally, participants noted that certain philanthropic organizations providing funding for poverty alleviation projects in countries in the Global South may do so based on religious motivations, which may not align with supporting the broader development or rights-based work of CSOs. Consequently, a consensus emerged that, while the private sector and philanthropic foundations could contribute to CSO funding for capacity strengthening and other purposes, exclusive reliance on these actors could pose a risk to CSO integrity and independence.



EXPANDING ACCESS TO CIVIL SOCIETY FUNDING FOR EMERGING SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The Advisory Group acknowledged the concerns raised by some participants regarding the limited access to funding for "less formalized actors" within civil society, particularly for emerging social movements. Social movements have a vital role in fostering vibrancy and in driving change within civil society. However, it was noted that social movements often face challenges in meeting the stringent reporting requirements associated with receiving funding.

In response to this, participants proposed exploring new and creative forms of reporting that could accommodate the unique characteristics of social movements. For example, leveraging platforms like Instagram and other social media channels to share images and videos of project work could provide a valuable means to demonstrate to donors how their funding is being utilized. This approach would enable social movements and community organizers to document their activities effectively, despite potentially less familiarity with traditional reporting methods.

InterAction, a Forus member and national CSO platform in the United States, highlighted a specific legal restriction under Tax Code 501(c)(3)³⁶ that prevents donations made to social movements from being eligible for tax write-offs. This limitation was identified as a barrier to accessing financial resources for new social movements. Participants suggested that even small amounts of funding made available to these movements could significantly support their activities, as they often struggle with limited or no financial resources.

³⁶ "The Restriction of Political Campaign Intervention by Section 501(c)(3) Tax-Exempt Organizations | Internal Revenue Service," accessed June 19, 2023, <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/charitable-organizations/the-restriction-of-political-campaign-intervention-by-section-501c3-tax-exempt-organizations>.



UNFAIR COMPETITION FACED BY CSOS IN ACCESSING FUNDING

Participants of the Advisory Group have raised concerns about the unfair competition faced by CSOs in accessing development funding. They highlighted the competition from bilateral and multilateral institutions that often seek and compete with CSOs at the local and district levels for such funding. The participants called for reduced intermediation by governments and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in the allocation of funding to national CSOs, emphasizing the importance of channelling development funding directly to non-state actors.

Furthermore, participants expressed their concerns about the dominant role of INGOs in determining which national CSOs receive funding and how they should implement projects. The Forus member in Nepal, NFN, shared an example where they wanted to lead a donor-funded development project in Nepal and involve an INGO as a co-lead. However, this was not possible due to the lack of provisions in the development contract to transfer project funding from a national platform to an INGO.



CHAPTER 5: REGIONAL & NATIONAL APPROACHES TO CSO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

This section of the report provides an overview of one regional approach and seven national approaches to CSO capacity strengthening. It sheds light on the challenges, strategies, and initiatives undertaken by CSOs to enhance their effectiveness in promoting social and environmental agendas. The chapter emphasizes the significance of capacity strengthening in fostering collaboration and driving positive change.

The insights shared in this chapter are the contributions of members from the Forus Advisory Group representing diverse regions such as Asia, Uganda, Canada, Nepal, Colombia, Nigeria, Finland, and Pakistan. These case studies offer a glimpse into the diverse landscapes and dynamics of CSO capacity strengthening efforts, underscoring the need for tailored approaches, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and sustainable resource allocation to CSOs due to their contributions to sustainable development agendas. These brief overviews aim to showcase various practices, as well as highlight the gaps and challenges experienced in CSO capacity strengthening.



UGANDA: BUILDING A STRONG CSO SECTOR THROUGH CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Written by Moses Isooba (UNNGOF - Uganda National NGO Forum)



UNNGOF's capacity strengthening interventions are informed by a vision to build a coherent, respected and well-informed NGO sector in Uganda, that actively contributes to the wellbeing and rights of citizens. To achieve this, UNNGOF has established a special vehicle called "civil society strengthening", that aims to develop a healthy, strong and well-coordinated NGO sector. This mechanism targets both UNNGOF members and non-members.

The main source of funding for capacity strengthening comes from international donors, although it is noted that this funding is often restrictive. UNNGOF, along with other CSO networks like DENIVA, has been instrumental in delivering capacity strengthening programs since 2006. The local initiative called the Quality Assurance Mechanism (QuAM) focuses on preparing NGOs to be accountable and ethical in their practices. This initiative has evolved into the #BeLegit campaign, which involves assessing organizations' internal health and ensuring their ability to comply with government obligations. The campaign has demystified compliance issues and enhanced CSO credibility and legitimacy.

With the initiation of the "shift the power" agenda, flexible funding partners like the Wilde Ganzen Foundation, come on board to support national CSO actors in developing knowledge and resources to strengthen the capacity of other local CSOs. The Change the Game Academy, hosted by UNNGOF, is one such initiative that has trained over 150 CSO actors in Uganda since 2018. With over 10 certified trainers in local fundraising and mobilizing support, it is an innovative blended-learning capacity strengthening program for CSOs that seeks to promote local philanthropy. The academy has over 10 certified trainers enabling CSOs to embrace local resource mobilization and enhance their skills in mobilizing state and non-state actors to address community issues together.

Through the Philanthropy for Development Programme, UNNGOF has focused on building the capacity of local government leaders and leaders of persons with disabilities in various regions of Uganda. This initiative aims to create a movement of leaders who can actively promote local philanthropy at the grassroots level. In the long term, UNNGOF wishes to establish a CSO academy that aligns with its vision, which would offer a wide range of courses to strengthen the capacity of CSOs, enabling them to effectively fulfil their mandates and contribute meaningfully to society.

Cooperation Canada

CANADA: A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO STRENGTHENING CSO CAPACITIES



Written by Darron Seller-Peritz (Cooperation Canada)

The Government of Canada primarily works through CSO coalitions to deliver capacity strengthening activities, leveraging their thematic expertise. Cooperation Canada, for instance, implements CSO capacity strengthening in sectors such as humanitarian response, prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, and anti-racism and decolonization through programs like the Humanitarian Response Network, Digna, and Anti-Racist Cooperation, respectively. Other umbrella organizations are especially useful when managing government funds to develop the capacities of small and medium organizations, such as the Inter-Council Network (ICN), which is a coalition of provincial networks, Climate Action Network, that brings together organizations taking action on climate and energy issues in Canada and internationally, and The Canadian Partnership for Women and Children's Health (CanWaCH), which focuses on improving health outcomes for women and children. CSOs usually both deliver and are the target of capacity strengthening initiatives, with other stakeholder groups sometimes participating in these initiatives. Some training is provided to CSOs by private contractors on behalf of the government. One such training is financial capacity building activity (FCBA), given to all recipients of Canadian funds to strengthen their capacities in financial reporting and program implementation. This is done in partnership with the government department that leads international development, humanitarian, and peace and security assistance efforts, called Global Affairs Canada (GAC). GAC-funded development initiatives may also participate in training sessions on how to integrate environmental and climate change considerations.

Most funding agreements between Global Affairs Canada and CSOs emphasize the importance of CSOs assessing their own capacity needs, which are then reflected in project implementation plans. However, these plans must align with government priorities, with a particular focus on working together with women and girls. For example, the Women Voice and Leadership Program, funded by the Government of Canada, supports capacity strengthening activities that advance gender equality and promote the rights of women and girls. Global Affairs Canada is currently undergoing a major overhaul of its grants and contributions process, and Cooperation Canada is actively involved in this transformation. Through initiatives like the Grants and Contributions Transformation Initiative and virtual Partner Forums, CSOs are engaged in exchanging ideas and plans to enhance collaboration with the government. Overcoming challenges such as risk aversion and exploring modalities for direct funding to local CSOs, including core capacity strengthening outside of specific program activities, are key priorities in this process.

To ensure effectiveness, CSO capacity strengthening programming should be longer-term than the current average of 3 to 4 years. There is a need for reshaping the funding process to allow for a solid foundation and the incorporation of long-term programming while streamlining documentation requirements to reduce administrative burdens.

NEPAL: APPROACHES TO CSO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING AND THE NEED FOR REFORMS

Written by Hum Bhandari (NFN - NGO Federation of Nepal)



In Nepal, the capacity strengthening of CSOs can occur through two main approaches: providing opportunities for CSOs to implement projects or manage funds, and conducting targeted capacity strengthening activities such as training sessions.

Bilateral and multilateral donors, as well as international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), are expected to implement projects at the local or community level through national CSOs in Nepal. This provides an opportunity for CSOs to enhance their capacity by strengthening their organizational policies, systems, and procedures. They are encouraged to identify strategic priorities, develop safeguarding policies, and establish transparent and standardized financial, human, and resource management systems. Managing funds and projects can lead to improvements in knowledge management, skills enhancement, and staff capabilities. However, the ongoing capacity strengthening of Nepalese CSOs has not been effectively implemented or sustained despite years of project involvement.

One of the reasons for the limited capacity of CSOs is the overall approach of INGOs and donors. Local CSOs often face challenges as their capacities are undermined and not fully trusted. International organizations establish expensive offices at both the national and subnational levels to manage funds, closely guiding and controlling the field-level implementation of their projects. In this process, experienced staff are hired and offered higher salaries compared to what local CSOs can afford. The remuneration and facilities provided by donor agencies are significantly more attractive. Consequently, CSOs become mere conduits for donors or INGOs to achieve their objectives, rather than building skills and capacity that can be retained within the local organizations.

Another challenge is the difficulty CSOs face in retaining skilled human resources and knowledge within their organizations when programs and funding are discontinued. The entire process tends to be project-oriented and donor-driven. Constructive engagement of CSOs in project design, adaptable approaches, and the creation of their own systems and policies could be beneficial, but this has not been implemented thus far.

A different approach to CSO capacity strengthening in Nepal involves providing training and skills development in sectors such as governance, organizational management, and advocacy. However, the impact of such initiatives often does not last long since they are short-term or focused on specific actions. Such capacity strengthening programs generally do not provide adequate resources or ensure follow-up actions.

There is a common misconception that CSOs have easy access to foreign funding and possess abundant resources, which excludes them from opportunities to access domestic funding and resources. Without an enabling environment for CSOs and without authorities intending to support and facilitate their capacity strengthening, local CSOs cannot be expected to thrive.

Network organizations often play a role in strengthening the capacity of their members and member organizations. However, assessing the effects of such capacity strengthening can be challenging. Typical training may not always translate into tangible action, especially if it lacks the necessary resources for follow-up action plans.

Reforms are needed in mechanisms of international cooperation, as well as country-level policies and practices, to genuinely strengthen the capacity of CSOs. It is not a one-time event but a continuous process that requires ongoing support and systemic changes.



COLOMBIA: STRENGTHENING THE CSO SECTOR THROUGH ACCREDITATION

Written by Lina Paola Lara Negrette (CCONG - Confederación Colombiana de ONG)



Civil society organizations in Colombia form an extensive network, characterized by their diversity, knowledge, and expertise. They possess a deep understanding of local realities and actively engage in shaping public policies. However, it is widely recognized that the enabling environment for organized civil society is steadily deteriorating, preventing CSOs from effectively fulfilling their roles as democracy champions and development actors.

Key challenges include:

- Persistent threats and violence against civil society leaders, particularly women, who face persecution, stigmatization, displacement, and even murder. Colombia ranks among the countries with the highest risks to the lives of civil society activists and human rights defenders in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Imposed limitations on political and civil rights through legal and regulatory means, such as tax reforms, constraints on public contracting, and protocols that restrict the right to social mobilization and citizen protest.
- Lack of a comprehensive public policy that promotes, supports, and strengthens the organized civil society sector, recognizing it as a significant development actor in its own right.
- Weakening of CSO capacity strengthening efforts by the public sector and international donors, as CSOs are often seen merely as contractors or resource operators, rather than partners in development.

In response to these realities, CCONG recognizes the need for proactive measures and proposes the implementation of a CSO Accreditation System as a self-regulation tool for the sector. This system, alongside the Public Social Rendering of Accounts (RSPC), aims to enhance transparency and highlight the distinctive value that CSOs offer in Colombia. By adopting this social practice, the results can be shared and celebrated.

The CSO Accreditation System is a systematic, collective, and self-management process that involves the voluntary participation of 200 NGOs. It focuses on five transforming actions:

- 1) Incorporating key international agendas that recognize the role of CSOs as development actors, allowing for the quantification of their contribution or value offer to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and adherence to the Istanbul Principles.
- 2) Serving as an autonomous, inclusive, and flexible instrument for recognizing CSOs, promoting their social value, and clarifying their work in different territories, sectors, and populations. In the first cohort, CSOs are acknowledged as autonomous actors with equal footing in engaging with other development actors.
- 3) Prioritizing the re-establishment of "trust" among CSOs and between CSOs and other stakeholders through collective "peer-to-peer" action. It maps and publicizes evidence of individual CSOs' value and the actions they undertake to transform realities in different territories and with diverse populations and sectors.
- 4) Requiring CSOs to undertake self-management actions for their own capacity strengthening. Participation in collective learning processes and knowledge exchange recognizes capacity strengthening within a conceptual frame of "how we learn" (socially) and "where we learn" (in networks).
- 5) Strengthening the political role of CSOs by constructing advocacy agendas, fostering public articulation, developing relationships within networks, platforms, and alliances, implementing effective monitoring mechanisms, and formulating proposals to address the social and political demands of various populations, sectors, and territories.

As a step towards sustainability, CCONG, along with CSOs from the first cohort and others in different territories, is actively collaborating on the collective construction of guidelines for a public policy that promotes and strengthens CSOs.



ASIA: STRENGTHENING CSO ADVOCACY FOR THE 2030 AGENDA THROUGH THE GALA ACADEMY

Written by Jyotsna Mohan Singh (ADA - Asia Development Alliance)



Across the Asia region, civil society networks play a significant role in capacity strengthening to their members. In the past, the Asia-wide regional CSO coalition called the Asia Development Alliance (ADA) received funding from the South Korean Development Agency (KOICA) for its regional-level CSO capacity strengthening program known as GALA (Glo-cal Advocacy Leadership in Asia). GALA, initiated in 2013, aims to enhance the capacities of CSOs across Asia in monitoring and implementing the 2030 Agenda. The program received additional funding from the European Union and the French Development Agency through Forus, as well as from the Transparency, Accountability & Participation Network (TAP Network) and the Japanese NGO Center for International Cooperation (JANIC).

The GALA Academy is a collaborative effort between two prominent regional civil society networks, the Asia Development Alliance (ADA) and the Asia Democracy Network (ADN). It aims to strengthen the international advocacy capacities of mid-and high-level staff in CSOs from across Asia, fostering second-tier leadership for strategic "glocal" actions on human rights, development, democracy, and related regional and international processes. The GALA Academy also seeks to establish clear linkages between the agendas of human rights and development communities. The program includes comprehensive training on SDG 16, including the development of national-level SDG 16-related indicators, as well as training on civil society engagement in voluntary national review (VNR) processes.

Since its inception, the GALA program has organized numerous regional, sub-regional, and national GALAs in countries such as Thailand (Bangkok), Cambodia (Mekong sub-region), Nepal, Sri Lanka, Mongolia (Ulaanbaatar), Singapore, and Bhutan. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the CSO capacity strengthening activities have been conducted virtually. The GALA program has witnessed participation not only from CSOs but also from UN institutions such as the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP).

Participants in GALA have been able to share CSO statements from various countries, including South Korea, Thailand, Cambodia, Mongolia, Vietnam, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. These statements were developed during GALA capacity strengthening programs held in the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) and UN High-Level Political Forums since 2016.

ADA

The GALA program adopts an approach to CSO capacity strengthening that emphasizes a planet-centric, gender-sensitive, conflict-sensitive, and human rights-based implementation of the SDGs. It focuses on mainstreaming SDGs 16 and 17, as well as SDGs 5, 10, and 13, across the 2030 Agenda implementation. The program also seeks to connect the priorities of SDG 16, which revolve around peace, human rights, and democracy, with other sectoral issues. By integrating the implementation of SDG 16 and 17 as means of implementation, GALA aims to influence the other thematic and sectoral goals (1-15) of the agenda.

In Asia, there is limited availability of funds for CSO capacity strengthening at the national level, making it challenging for regional platforms like ADA to secure funding despite their impressive results over the past decade. Multi-stakeholder capacity-building programs in the region are rare, with only a few workshops organized by UNESCAP and UNDP in the past. There is a pressing need for more funding opportunities to facilitate the organization of multi-stakeholder capacity strengthening events.



NIGERIA: ONGOING ASSESSMENTS OF CSO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Written by Oyebisi, B. Oluseyi and Chidinma Okpara (NNNGO - Nigeria Network of NGOs)



NNNGO is the first overarching membership body for civil society organizations in Nigeria, working to facilitate effective advocacy on issues of poverty and other developmental challenges. NNNGO adopts a comprehensive approach to capacity strengthening, focusing on addressing the existing gaps in CSOs' policies, programs, systems, and structures for effectiveness and sustainability. These are reflected in the strategic priorities of NNNGO, which include creating an enabling and operational environment, building accountable and inclusive organizations, and promoting effective actions on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

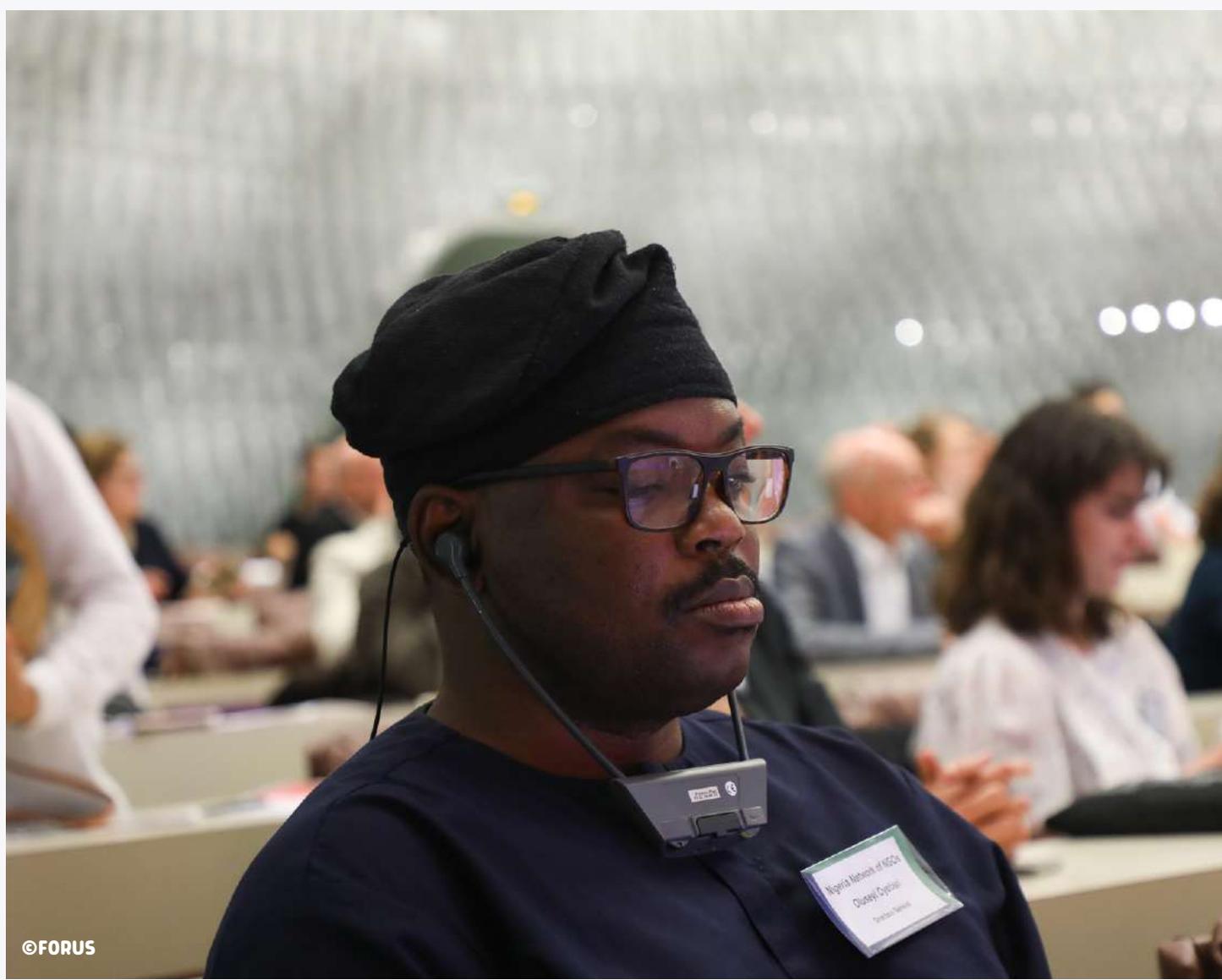
In Nigeria, CSO capacity strengthening is primarily undertaken by international donor organizations, and CSOs themselves. Donors play a crucial role in funding CSO capacity strengthening initiatives, as well as delivering capacity strengthening programs to other stakeholders. As an umbrella platform, NNNGO has been instrumental in strengthening the capacities of CSOs and other stakeholders in the sector.

To assess capacity gaps within the nonprofit sector, NNNGO developed a nonprofit assessment tool in 2019. The responses collected through this tool enabled the network to develop a capacity assessment report for the nonprofit sector, which served as a foundation for identifying and addressing existing gaps. In 2021, NNNGO organized a nonprofit management course across three states in Nigeria (Rivers, Oyo and Abuja), attracting 222 leaders from various organizations. That same year, a master class session was held to provide practical guidance on nonprofit governance to board members, supporting the achievement of their organizations' visions and missions.

In 2022, NNNGO initiated several multistakeholder initiatives, including the police-citizen dialogue series in Abuja and Lagos. These dialogues brought together CSOs, government representatives, and police officers to rebuild trust between the police and citizens. Furthermore, NNNGO facilitated a dialogue session between MDAs, CSOs, and other stakeholders to harmonize regulatory frameworks at the sub-national level, enhancing civil society engagement and compliance including training over 2,000 nonprofits on nonprofit management topics and themes.

The 2019 assessment of CSOs in Nigeria highlighted improvements in areas such as volunteering, grassroots mobilization, policy analysis, evidence-based development approaches, advocacy, and resilience. However, weaknesses were also identified, including limited resources (human and financial), weak internal governance, program management, monitoring and evaluation, record keeping, regulatory compliance, and strategic planning. To address these challenges, it is recommended to conduct a comprehensive capacity needs assessment survey, develop a tailored capacity strengthening plan, implement it, and monitor progress for feedback and adjustments. Context-specific approaches should be adopted to improve governance, accountability, and transparency within the sector.

Improving CSO capacity strengthening in Nigeria can be achieved through the effective use of technology, fostering partnerships with the private sector, and enhancing collaboration among CSOs. Establishing a CSO resource hub that caters to the Nigerian context would be beneficial. Moreover, a greater focus on capacity strengthening will enable CSOs to mobilize local resources, promote grassroots accountability, and align resources based on local needs. By prioritizing community knowledge and engagement, while being practical and intentional, will enable CSOs to move from talking to acting, ensuring their governance and strategy reflect the powershift they want to see in society



FINLAND: A DEDICATED CSO CHAPTER IN THE VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEW

Written by Rilli Lappalainen (Fingo - Finnish Development NGOs)



Fingo is a national platform consisting of 270 NGOs in Finland, dedicated to sustainable development, global justice, and global citizenship education. Our primary goals are to foster cooperation among our member organizations and enhance the capacity of CSOs to operate in a changing world. We strive to influence political decisions to reduce inequalities and promote human rights at the national, European, and global levels. Additionally, we aim to communicate the impactful work of CSOs worldwide and foster engaging discussions on global issues. Over 70% of our members actively work with Agenda 2030 and sustainable development.

In 2020, the Finnish Government presented Finland's Voluntary National Review (VNR) for the second time at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). During the planning of the VNR report, Fingo proposed the inclusion of a dedicated CSO chapter, which was agreed upon due to Finland's long-standing tradition of intensive multi-stakeholder cooperation and the existence of a national commission for sustainable development for over 25 years. Fingo extended an open invitation to CSOs and trade unions to participate in developing the CSO chapter for the VNR. The invitations were sent to all Fingo members, partners on our external email list (over 1600 subscribers), and fellow thematic umbrella organizations. All interested organizations were welcome to join. The assessment process involved thematic working groups for each goal, coordinated by Fingo. The work was based on published reports and other relevant available material. The groups analyzed the findings and trends for each goal and formulated recommendations for the Finnish government. In total, 49 organizations participated, with varying numbers from a few to 12 organizations working on each goal. The names of participating organizations are listed at the beginning of each assessment in the report.

While finding common ground for the assessments was generally straightforward, some goals required more effort to establish a shared understanding of Finland's progress. Nevertheless, every final assessment was made with consensus. Time proved to be the most valuable resource throughout the process. The material dimension of sustainable development, particularly consumption and resources, presented a significant challenge compared to the relatively easier consensus on social development. Global responsibility received slightly less attention, but key priorities were addressed. We addressed gaps in SDG expertise within member organizations by involving Fingo staff members. Although some organizations felt their voices were not adequately heard, consensus was reached through negotiations. Overall, the feedback from the process was largely positive. The experience taught us valuable lessons. CSOs had the opportunity to get to know each other better, and through negotiations, consensus was achieved. The report showcased the expertise of CSOs and further motivated their commitment to Agenda 2030 and their individual work towards sustainable development.

PAKISTAN: STRENGTHENING LOCAL CSOS AS A MEANS TO CREATE AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT



Written by Zia ur Rehman (PDA - Pakistan Development Alliance)

The Pakistan Development Alliance has been at the forefront of advocating for civic rights and spaces in the country since 2014. PDA aims to strengthen and engage CSOs that adopt human rights-based approaches. By collaborating with regional and global forums and alliances, PDA works towards achieving an inclusive, peaceful, democratic, and just society.

However, the civil society sector in Pakistan faces significant challenges due to stringent regulatory frameworks and policies implemented by successive governments over the past decade. Rights-based organizations are diminishing, while humanitarian and service delivery organizations led by ruling elites have gained prominence. The expansion of international NGOs to the subnational and district level has further marginalized local CSOs. The expulsion of 19 rights-based INGOs from the country in 2019, coupled with the thriving of INGOs with connections to establishment-led institutions, has exacerbated the situation. Additionally, frequent man-made and natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods, and droughts, along with shrinking civic spaces and funding constraints, have compelled many local rights-based organizations to transform into service delivery organizations. These organizations now heavily rely on project-based resources, often functioning as local contractors, with little allocation for staff or organizational capacity strengthening. This centralization of power has further weakened the sector.

Moreover, the lack of support organizations in the country has created additional gaps and challenges in capacity strengthening for local CSOs. Previously, there were around 12 support organizations providing assistance to local CSOs, government institutions, and private sector stakeholders in developing capacities related to strategic thinking, institutional policies, project cycle management, monitoring and evaluation, and communication skills. However, the devastating earthquake in 2005 and widespread floods in 2010 diverted these support organizations towards service delivery.

Collaboration opportunities between the civil society sector and the public sector in Pakistan are limited, resulting in an inadequate understanding of contemporary contexts and development agendas within the public sector.

PDA

Most capacity strengthening interventions available for CSOs are provided at the national and provincial headquarters level, leaving the majority of CSOs working at the subnational and district levels with limited opportunities to enhance their institutional and programmatic capacities. Recognizing these gaps, the Pakistan Development Alliance aims to address the capacity strengthening needs of local CSOs, despite scarce resources. Furthermore, the advancement of technology in the development sector has created a demand for technically skilled human resources with a deep understanding of human rights instruments.

To address the capacity strengthening challenges in Pakistan's development sector, four recommendations are proposed. Firstly, the development and strengthening of dedicated support institutions to build the capacity of local civil society organizations, government sector institutions, academia, and private sector organizations in relation to human rights-based agendas and innovative approaches for achieving multilateral development goals. Secondly, the initiation of peer-to-peer exchange programs for on-the-job and off-the-job capacity strengthening interventions among local support NGOs and INGOs. These exchange programs will facilitate knowledge sharing, cultural understanding, and learning opportunities at the national and sub-national levels. Thirdly, the allocation of ample resources and finances in every developmental project to invest in institutional development and capacity strengthening of local staff. And finally, the gradual transition from a "project proposal" culture, popular among donors, to locally-led developmental interventions aimed at strengthening local CSOs and fostering sustainability.

By implementing these recommendations, Pakistan can make significant progress in addressing capacity strengthening needs within its development sector and promote the growth and effectiveness of local civil society organizations.





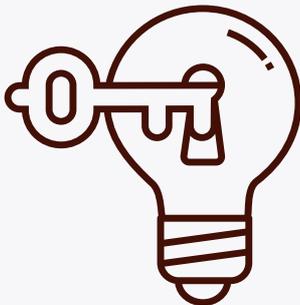
Across the Asia region, civil society networks play a significant role in capacity strengthening to their members.

Jyotsna Mohan Singh
(ADA - Asia Development Alliance)



CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section of the report, Forus revisits the conclusions drawn from the various chapters on CSO capacity strengthening and presents recommendations for moving forward. These valuable insights and recommendations have been gathered through the contributions of the Advisory Group and the extensive work of Forus' members in this field. They are grounded in several key principles, including the prioritization of processes and the use of process indicators, the promotion of long-term resilience and sustainability of civil society organizations, the facilitation of peer-to-peer knowledge exchange and experiential learning, and the recognition of the importance of establishing enduring partnerships with civil society.



Forus also emphasizes the significance of local ownership, participatory processes, and the acknowledgement of power dynamics through the adoption of horizontal approaches. The conclusions and recommendations are organized into five distinct sets: firstly, the need for improving VNR reporting on CSO capacity strengthening; secondly, the importance of effectively measuring progress in CSO capacity strengthening efforts; thirdly, the essential autonomy and agency of CSOs in shaping their own capacity strengthening initiatives; fourthly, the potential of capacity strengthening to promote localization, power shift, and decolonized approaches; and finally, recommendations on transforming funding systems for CSO capacity strengthening.

ENHANCING VNR REPORTING ON CSO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Conclusion

In goal 17, the 2030 Agenda uses the term "capacity building" to describe activities aimed at enhancing the capacities of CSOs and other stakeholder groups. However, this language fails to acknowledge the pre-existing capacities that already exist within CSOs and other stakeholders.

Recommendation

A language shift is necessary, moving away from terms like "capacity building" or "capacity development." Forus has chosen to use the term "capacity strengthening" instead, to explicitly recognize and appreciate the existing capacities within these groups. Other possibilities could be "capacity sharing", "learning from each other", and "peer-to-peer knowledge sharing". This shift should not only be reflected in terminology but also in the concrete implementation and approaches of these initiatives, highlighting the collaborative efforts to further strengthen the capacities of all stakeholders involved.



Conclusion

The research conducted by Forus between 2017 and 2022 indicates a positive trend towards increased reporting on capacity strengthening efforts by UN Member States (UN MS) in their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). However, the lack of clear and shared definitions undermines the effectiveness and comparability of national reports.

Recommendation

UN Member States should improve their reporting on the capacity strengthening of different stakeholder groups, including civil society, as part of their SDG 17 reporting to the UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). It is crucial for UN MS to agree on common definitions of capacity strengthening for reporting purposes, ensuring flexibility to cover various types of capacity strengthening initiatives. Additionally, the reports should highlight the specific roles played by each stakeholder in the capacity strengthening initiatives.



Conclusion

While governments often acknowledge the important role of CSOs in implementing the 2030 Agenda, there is limited evidence in their VNRs of prioritizing CSO capacity strengthening at the national level. Forus' analysis of VNRs from 2017 to 2022 reveals a lack of strategic approaches to CSO capacity strengthening by UN MS.

Recommendation

UN member states should adopt a long-term and strategic approach to CSO capacity strengthening, aligning it with the monitoring, implementation, and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda.



Conclusion

Despite the emphasis on multi-stakeholder collaboration as a vital means of implementing the 2030 Agenda, some countries only include civil society in a multi-stakeholder consultation process for the first time when preparing their VNRs. Furthermore, there is insufficient evidence in VNR reporting to date of a well-planned and long-term approach to multi-stakeholder capacity strengthening linked to the 2030 Agenda.

Recommendation

UN MS should ensure a well-planned and long-term approach to joint multi-stakeholder capacity strengthening, integrating it into the monitoring and implementation of the 2030 Agenda. CSOs possess valuable skills and knowledge that can be utilized to facilitate multi-stakeholder capacity strengthening when required.



Conclusion

VNR reports prepared by UN MS between 2017 and 2022 have identified several priorities for capacity strengthening in line with the 2030 Agenda. Some examples of priorities include gender equality, strengthening of digital capacities, enhancing monitoring and evaluation capabilities, improving data collection and analysis, strengthening statistical capacities (including data disaggregation), and fostering partnerships

Recommendation

It is essential for UN Member States to engage in extensive consultations with diverse sectors of society. Through these consultations, national capacity strengthening needs should be identified and integrated into the VNR reports as part of SDG 17 reporting. By involving various stakeholders, including civil society organizations and other relevant actors, in the decision-making process, capacity strengthening efforts can be better aligned with the specific contexts and priorities of each country.



Conclusion

High-quality CSO spotlight reports can significantly enhance the understanding of the challenges and realities associated with the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national level. However, it is observed that donors do not allocate specific funding for strengthening the capacities of CSOs in producing these reports.

Recommendation

It is recommended that dedicated funding be allocated for the capacity strengthening of CSOs, specifically aimed at supporting the production of high-quality CSO spotlight reports. These reports provide a valuable civil society perspective on the progress made in implementing the 2030 Agenda, and their production should be seen as an essential component of promoting transparency and accountability. By investing in CSO spotlight reports, donors can foster a more robust civil society engagement and contribute to a comprehensive assessment of national efforts towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.



MEASURING PROGRESS FOR THE CAPACITY STRENGTHENING OF CSOS

Conclusion

The current data-collection systems do not provide an accurate measurement of the extent of capacity strengthening initiatives for civil society and other stakeholder groups related to the monitoring and implementation of the 2030 Agenda at national or regional levels.

Recommendation

The international community should adopt global, regional, and national level indicators linked to SDG 17 that can effectively measure the extent of capacity strengthening efforts for CSOs and other stakeholder groups. These indicators will enable the measurement and evaluation of the resources dedicated to 2030 Agenda-related capacity strengthening at various levels, facilitating a more comprehensive assessment of progress.



Conclusion

Measuring the investment by national governments on the capacity strengthening of CSOs at the national level is currently challenging. Most UN Member States lack specific budget lines in their national budgets that reflect the financial resources allocated to 2030 Agenda-related capacity strengthening for CSOs and other stakeholder groups.

Recommendation

National governments should adopt specific indicators to measure the annual financial expenditure on CSO capacity strengthening, making it mandatory for governments to report on this expenditure. This information should be publicly available to promote transparency and accountability. Furthermore, governments should establish clear budget lines in their annual budgets to ensure dedicated funding for CSO capacity strengthening, acknowledging the crucial role played by CSOs and ensuring their sustainable development.



INCREASING THE AUTONOMY & AGENCY OF CSOS REGARDING THEIR OWN CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Conclusion

Current CSO capacity strengthening efforts related to the 2030 Agenda are often dictated by prescriptive project agreements funded by donors. This limits the autonomy of CSOs in addressing their specific capacity strengthening needs.

Recommendation

CSOs should be granted greater autonomy in identifying and addressing their own capacity strengthening requirements. Funding for CSOs should allow them the flexibility to allocate resources according to their needs and priorities.



Conclusion

CSOs should be granted greater autonomy in identifying and addressing their own capacity strengthening requirements. Funding for CSOs should allow them the flexibility to allocate resources according to their needs and priorities.

Recommendation

The international community, in collaboration with representatives of various stakeholder groups, should develop systematic needs assessment methodologies specifically linked to the 2030 Agenda. Existing tools developed by these groups should be utilized whenever possible.



Conclusion

CSOs often play a limited role as recipients of capacity strengthening activities, disregarding their valuable experience and expertise that can be shared with broader civil society and other sectors.

Recommendation

CSOs should not be confined to the role of recipients in capacity strengthening efforts. Given their diverse expertise and experience related to the 2030 Agenda, CSOs should take on leadership roles in delivering capacity strengthening initiatives, both within civil society and across other sectors. CSOs are also key contributors to any localisation effort.



THE ROLE OF CSO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING IN PROMOTING DECOLONIZATION & POWER SHIFT

Conclusion

Unequal power relationships often stem from actual or presumed differences in capacity, where one set of actors is seen as possessing valuable skills, knowledge, and resources, while another is considered a passive recipient. Unfortunately, this dynamic is prevalent in relationships between donors or INGOs and their partners in the Global South.

Recommendation

Donors and INGOs should redefine their relationships with partners in the Global South, recognizing the knowledge and expertise of communities and CSOs stakeholders and thus fostering collaborative partnerships.



Conclusion

Localization entails recognizing the value of community assets, such as financial resources, skills, relationships, and networks, within the communities where development activities occur. It also involves elevating the voices of community representatives in development processes. Localization is a crucial aspect of sustainable development that emphasizes community ownership and participation.

Recommendation

To achieve a much-needed power shift between Global North and Global South countries, donors must support locally led and driven development in partner countries. This requires donors to transform their operational systems and organizational cultures, which will necessitate significant efforts on their part.



Conclusion

To achieve a much-needed power shift between Global North and Global South countries, donors must support locally led and driven development in partner countries. This requires donors to transform their operational systems and organizational cultures, which will necessitate significant efforts on their part.

Recommendation

Local organizations should have autonomy in determining their own learning agenda and collaborate with partners to develop it. Capacity strengthening initiatives should build upon existing capacities, acknowledge and value local knowledge, and foster local leadership from the outset.



Conclusion

Achieving genuine decolonization of international development systems necessitates a fundamental shift in mindset. This may require training individuals from the Global North who are engaged in international cooperation to understand and challenge the prevailing colonial values, traditions, and cultures that continue to shape the sector.

Recommendation

Capacity strengthening efforts should prioritize creating opportunities for critical examination and challenging the existing dynamics influenced by colonial legacies. By fostering a deeper understanding and awareness of these issues, capacity strengthening can contribute to the decolonization process.



Conclusion

Some Northern-based development actors (including some INGOs) continue to exhibit colonial ideas and attitudes in their language, imagery, communication strategies, policies, and products, which perpetuates unequal power dynamics.

Recommendation

To support the principles of decolonization, development actors must undergo a comprehensive transformation of their language, lexicon, imagery, and organizational practices. This entails adopting inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches that challenge and dismantle colonial legacies, fostering a more equitable and respectful engagement with diverse communities.



Conclusion

The current funding systems linked to international aid favour organizations in the Global North, perpetuating unequal power dynamics and hindering the knowledge and leadership of local civil societies. Burdensome bureaucratic processes that monitor adherence to laws and regulations further reinforce the colonial notion of an inherent risk associated with local organizations.

Recommendation

To decolonize the funding systems, compliance processes related to donor funding, including those for CSO capacity strengthening, should be reformed. Collaboration with partners from the global majority is essential in developing alternative approaches that prioritize trust, shared responsibility, and accountability. This shift away from burdensome bureaucratic processes will enable the recognition of the crucial role of local organizations, fostering a more equitable and effective development paradigm.



TRANSFORMING FUNDING SYSTEMS FOR CSO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Conclusion

The responsibility for ensuring and funding CSO capacity strengthening in relation to global agendas such as the 2030 Agenda is currently unclear, creating ambiguity and potential gaps in coordination and support. Despite this uncertainty, it is crucial for CSOs to actively engage and participate in complex processes at the national, regional, and international levels to drive meaningful progress.

Recommendation

To address the challenge of ensuring and funding CSO capacity strengthening related to global agendas, a shared responsibility framework should be established among national, regional, and global entities. This entails effective coordination and collaboration between governments, regional actors, key UN agencies and civil society. By working together, these stakeholders can create the conditions to ensure that CSOs contribute to global agendas.



Conclusion

CSOs heavily rely on project grants as their primary source of funding, which often hinders their ability to prioritize long-term sustainability and organizational strengthening. Additionally, the lack of access to core funding perpetuates the perception of CSOs solely as service providers rather than strategic actors in development processes.

Recommendation

To promote the long-term development and resilience of CSOs, it is essential to provide them with adequate core funding. This core funding should be flexible and enable CSOs to address their identified capacity strengthening needs. By ensuring a sustainable financial base, CSOs can allocate resources to enhance their organizational capacities and further contribute to sustainable development initiatives.



Conclusion

Donors have traditionally focused on funding individual CSOs, therefore neglecting the development of broader CSO networks and supportive ecosystems to foster an enabling environment for civil society

Recommendation

Donors should support the development of CSO networks and supportive ecosystems by funding a range of resource organizations dedicated to strengthening the overall capacities of the CSO sector. Examples of such organizations include sharing platforms, resource hubs, training centers, research institutes, and professional associations. By investing in these entities, donors can contribute to the growth and sustainability of the CSO sector as a whole, fostering a more supportive environment for civil society.



Conclusion

Donors from the Global North hold significant power in shaping the funding landscape by setting the rules, determining timelines, and controlling the monitoring and evaluation processes. This power dynamic often leaves CSOs from the global majority with limited decision-making authority and minimal input in development partnerships.

Recommendation

Donors should adopt participatory approaches to grant-making. This includes involving CSOs in the decision-making process and considering their inputs and perspectives. Additionally, donors should explore alternative funding modalities and systems, such as community philanthropy, to ensure a more equitable distribution of resources. Donors should also explore mechanisms to ensure direct funding reaches CSOs in partner countries, bypassing intermediaries, and strengthening the capacity and autonomy of local organizations.



Conclusion

The current project-based funding approach severely limits the scope for CSOs to innovate in overall project delivery and specifically in their capacity strengthening efforts. This restriction hinders their ability to adapt and respond effectively to evolving challenges.

Recommendation

Donors should prioritize longer-term core funding, providing stability and predictability. Simultaneously, funding mechanisms need to become more flexible, allowing CSOs to take risks and explore innovative approaches. It is crucial to foster an environment that encourages CSOs to view failures as valuable learning experiences, promoting organizational growth and improvement. By evaluating the allocation and utilization of financial and non-financial resources, funders can emphasize the importance of the implementation process. This approach creates space for CSOs to showcase their creativity and adaptability in project delivery, leading to more impactful outcomes.



Conclusion

Donors tend to heavily rely on extensive reporting and audits as a means of assessing accountability, often focusing primarily on financial aspects. However, this approach does not necessarily capture the true impact and effectiveness of projects.

Recommendation

To foster a decolonized funding model, donors and local partners should collaborate to establish a shared understanding of accountability adapted to a specific context. This includes incorporating essential factors such as engaging local auditors and actively involving the concerned community. Accountability should be defined based on the impact on the community, as judged by the community to ensure that their voices and perspectives are at the forefront of the evaluation process.



Conclusion

Research has shown that community philanthropy, which involves actively mobilizing community resources for social change, has multiple benefits. It fosters trust-building, confidence, changes accountability dynamics, and promotes constituency building. It also enhances a sense of ownership, legitimizes local efforts, and upholds dignity, while fostering mutual accountability through inclusive engagement and respectful treatment. However, the majority of development and humanitarian funding tends to be directed towards INGOs and large institutions, overlooking the valuable resources present within communities and local CSOs. These local actors possess the most profound understanding of their local realities, relationships, and effective strategies for driving positive social change.

Recommendation

Donors should shift their focus from funds to resources as the primary driver of social change. By recognizing and valuing the diverse resources available within communities and local CSOs, a more equitable relationship can be established between Global North actors and the global majority. This approach acknowledges the significance of locally-led development and empowers communities and CSOs to leverage their expertise and resources for sustainable impact.



Conclusion

Civil society organisations faces significant challenges in accessing funding, particularly in countries with democratic deficits, including limited support for CSO capacity strengthening. CSOs in such countries often encounter obstacles in securing funding if they have openly criticized government decisions or actions. Furthermore, government-organized NGOs funded by authoritarian regimes typically focus on service delivery rather than broader civic engagement.

Recommendation

It is crucial to encourage and incentivize all UN member states to adopt public policies that prioritize CSO strengthening at the national and local levels. The independence of CSOs should be safeguarded, irrespective of their funding sources. Transparent rules and procedures must be established for CSO funding allocation, ensuring accountability and fairness in the allocation and distribution of resources. These measures will contribute to a conducive environment for civil society, enabling them to fulfill their vital role in promoting democratic values and social development.



Conclusion

The significant contributions of CSOs to society often go unrecognized, with official recognition primarily limited to their involvement in traditional service delivery. However, CSOs play crucial public interest roles, including holding governments accountable for their commitments and advocating for marginalized and excluded groups. To truly appreciate the value of CSOs, there is a need for greater awareness and understanding of their public interest functions. If this were achieved, public funding for CSOs would be more likely to be perceived as an essential investment, rather than as a financial burden to be borne by the wider society. Moreover, CSOs should be able to better measure, describe and communicate about the positive social, societal environmental, and economic impacts of the work that they do, and to better explain the strong links between their work and the broader public interest through more engaging narratives.

Recommendation

Donors should allocate funding for public awareness campaigns aimed at enhancing understanding of the roles and functions of CSOs. Furthermore, donors should support CSOs in developing new narratives that effectively communicate their public interest role and highlight the invaluable contributions they make to society. By investing in these efforts, donors can contribute to a better informed society that recognizes and supports the vital work of CSOs.



WITH THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE FOLLOWING FORUS' MEMBERS

1. **ABONG** - Associação Brasileira de ONGs (Brazil)
2. **ADA** - Asian Development Alliance (Asia)
3. **Alianza ONG** (Dominican Republic)
4. **Bond** (United Kingdom)
5. **CCONG** - Confederación Colombiana de ONG (Colombia)
6. **Cooperation Canada** (Canada)
7. **FINGO** - Finnish NGO Platform (Finland)
8. **InterAction** (United States)
9. **LAPAS** - Latvian Platform for Development Cooperation (Latvia)
10. **NFN** - NGO Federation of Nepal (Nepal)
11. **NNNGO** - Nigeria Network of NGOs (Nigeria)
12. **PDA** - Pakistan Development Alliance (Pakistan)
13. **PLATONG** - Plataforma das ONGs de Cabo Verde (Cape Verde)
14. **UNNGOF** - Uganda National NGO Forum (Uganda)

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