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# Cooperation That Works

## Civil Society in South-South and Triangular Cooperation



2026

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



# List of Abbreviations

| Abbreviation | Full Term |
|---|---|
| **ABC** | Brazilian Cooperation Agency |
| **ASEAN** | Association of Southeast Asian Nations |
| **AU** | African Union |
| **BAPA+40** | Second High-Level UN Conference on South-South Cooperation (2019) |
| **BRI** | Belt and Road Initiative (China) |
| **BRICS+** | Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa and expanded members |
| **CAF** | Corporación Andina de Fomento (CAF)<br>Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean |
| **CELAC** | Community of Latin American and Caribbean States |
| **CIDCA** | China International Development Cooperation Agency |
| **CSO** | Civil Society Organisation |
| **FfD** | Financing for Development |
| **FiCS** | Finance in Common Summit |
| **GCF** | Green Climate Fund |
| **HLPF** | High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development |
| **IBSA** | India-Brazil-South Africa Facility for Poverty and Hunger Alleviation |
| **ITEC** | Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation |
| **JICA** | Japan International Cooperation Agency |

| Abbreviation | Full Term |
|---|---|
| **LDC** | Least Developed Country |
| **ODA** | Official Development Assistance |
| **OECD-DAC** | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development — Development Assistance Committee |
| **SDG** | Sustainable Development Goal |
| **SIDS** | Small Island Developing States |
| **SSC** | South-South Cooperation |
| **SSTC** | South-South and Triangular Cooperation |
| **TOSSD** | Total Official Support for Sustainable Development |
| **TrC** | Triangular Cooperation |
| **UNDP** | United Nations Development Programme |
| **UNOSSC** | United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation |
| **VLR** | Voluntary Local Review |
| **VNR** | Voluntary National Review |



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# Executive Summary

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

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

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

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



## This is where civil society matters.

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

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



# Key Findings



## SSTC works best when it is adapted, not copied.

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



## Civil society improves the quality and reaches of cooperation.

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



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

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



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

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



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

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




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

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

# Key Findings

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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







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

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

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

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






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

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



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

Introduction - Chapter 1

# Why South-South and Triangular Cooperation, Why Civil Society, Why Now

## A critical moment for development cooperation

The 2030 Agenda is entering its final stretch in a context of profound uncertainty.

Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals remains uneven and insufficient. According to the 2025 UN progress report, 35% of SDG targets are achieving good progress or are on track, 47% lack sufficient effort, and 18% have failed to move forward or have moved backwards. Today many countries are managing overlapping pressures: debt distress, climate shocks, food and energy insecurity, conflict, displacement, shrinking civic space, growing inequality and weakening trust in public institutions. The global financing gap is vast, but money alone will not solve the implementation crisis if cooperation models remain disconnected from the people, institutions and local realities that shape outcomes.

Development cooperation has long been presented to connect resources, expertise and political commitment. Yet too much cooperation still relies on vertical models: external experts define solutions; funding cycles are short; accountability flows upwards to donors or central governments; and communities are treated as beneficiaries rather than co-designers. These models can deliver outputs, but they often fail to build ownership, legitimacy and sustained capacity. SSTC have gained renewed relevance because they respond to some of these weaknesses.

They emphasise solidarity, peer learning, mutual benefit and exchange among countries and actors facing shared or comparable development challenges. They recognise that expertise is not located only in the North or in large international institutions. Knowledge also comes from communities, local governments, social movements, public institutions, national civil society platforms, and practitioners who have navigated similar constraints.

However, SSTC should not be idealised. They do not automatically produce equality, accountability or inclusion. Many SSTC initiatives remain highly state-centric. Some are shaped by geopolitical competition, commercial interests or strategic influence. Others lack transparent information, independent monitoring and participation from affected communities. If SSTC is to help accelerate sustainable development, its governance must be improved. Civil society inclusion is central to that improvement.

# Report Purpose and Target Audience

This report is written for governments, UN actors, regional organisations, development funders, public development banks, civil society networks and Forus members seeking to make South-South and triangular cooperation (SSTC) more inclusive, accountable and effective. It is also relevant for researchers, journalists and civil society advocates interested in understanding how cooperation works in practice and who gets to shape it.



Drawing on experiences from across the Forus network, the report examines what enables effective and locally grounded SSTC, where barriers to civil society participation persist, and what changes are needed in policy, financing and governance.

The report starts from a simple premise: cooperation works better when the people and organisations closest to communities are part of shaping it. Its purpose is therefore not to celebrate SSTC uncritically, nor simply to argue that civil society should be "included" in existing spaces. Instead, it makes a broader claim: SSTC is more legitimate, grounded, adaptable and sustainable when civil society is recognised as part of the cooperation architecture itself.

Civil society organisations bring knowledge, trust, accountability and long-term presence that governments, development banks and multilateral actors cannot easily replicate on their own. They help translate policy into local realities, connect communities across borders, identify risks early, and sustain engagement beyond project timelines. Their role is not only about participation, but also about improving the quality, effectiveness and accountability of cooperation.

The SDGs represent a universal agenda, and the questions raised in this report go beyond technical debates on development cooperation. They concern who shapes decisions, whose knowledge counts, and whether cooperation is accountable to the people and communities it is intended to serve.

While timed to contribute to the 2026 UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) and related global discussions, the report is intended as a longer-term contribution to debates on the future of international cooperation.

This report helps decision-makers see the important role of civil society in South-South and triangular cooperation. It makes cooperation more legitimate, grounded, adaptable, and likely to produce results for people and communities. The points made here are relevant to national governments creating cooperation strategies, regional organizations setting up peer-learning networks, public development banks applying safeguard and participation standards, climate and SDG funders, as well as journalists, researchers, and civil society advocates wanting to understand how cooperation really works. The SDGs represent a universal agenda. The case for civil society in SSTC focuses on accountability, effectiveness, and who gets to shape the decisions that impact communities

## The report therefore does four things:



It clarifies what makes South-South and triangular cooperation effective, including trust, peer relationships, contextual relevance, flexibility, shared learning and governance design.



It documents how civil society contributes across the SSTC ecosystem: as connector, knowledge producer, facilitator, co-designer, implementer, monitor, advocate and accountability actor.



It analyses where civil society is still missing from SSTC governance, financing, design and reporting, and why that weakens cooperation outcomes.



It offers an action agenda for member states, UN agencies, development funders, regional organisations, post-2030 negotiators and Forus members.

# Building on Forus' track record

Forus is a global network of 74 national platforms of civil society organisations and 8 regional coalitions, representing thousands of civil society organisations around the world. Its members operate at the intersection of local realities, national policy processes, regional coordination and global advocacy. This gives Forus a distinctive perspective on South-South and triangular cooperation.

Forus members are not only observers of development cooperation. They are practitioners of peer learning, accountability, advocacy and locally led development. They work with communities, local governments, national institutions, UN country teams, regional bodies and development partners. They contribute to Voluntary National Reviews, SDG monitoring, localisation strategies, civic space advocacy, public finance accountability, climate action and inclusive governance.

This report is the latest in a sustained body of work by Forus on SDG implementation, civil society accountability, and the role of national and regional platforms in advancing the 2030 Agenda. It builds directly on several previous Forus publications. The 2025 Forus Localisation Report — "Unlocking the Power of Localisation and Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships to Rescue the SDGs" — documented how civil society supports locally grounded SDG implementation, drawing on over 15 case studies across five regions. The 2025 VNR report "VNRs at the Crossroads: From Symbolism to Systemic Change" and the "Decade of Accountability" assessment, both published ahead of HLPF 2025, represent eight years of Forus civil society monitoring of the Voluntary National Review process across 191 countries. The 2024 Forus report "Rebuilding Trust for Inclusive Governance: Unlocking SDG 16 for Peaceful Societies" documented how civil society supports accountable institutions.

The multi-edition "Progressing National SDGs Implementation" series, prepared with Forus and coalition partners from 2016 to present, provided independent civil society assessments of VNR reporting at successive HLPFs. Key editions of this series, including the 2019, 2022 and 2023 HLPF assessments, provide the longitudinal civil society evidence base on which this report's analysis of SSTC governance is grounded.

Together, these publications show a consistent finding: civil society strengthens SDG implementation when it is included, and the gap grows when it is excluded. This SSTC report asks the next question: how can the cooperation architecture itself be redesigned to make civil society inclusion the norm, not the exception? A key lesson from previous Forus work is that promising local practices often remain isolated, even when they could be useful to peers in other countries or regions. The question for this report is therefore: how do local experiences travel? How do they become peer learning? How can cooperation systems support their adaptation rather than leaving them fragmented?

SSTC are one answer to that question. But for SSTC to work well, the civil society actors who hold community knowledge and facilitate peer exchange need to be visible in the system.

# Scope and methodology

This report draws on case material from across the Forus membership, complemented by desk review of selected UN, OECD, UNCTAD, Forus and partner documentation. It looks across a wide SSTC ecosystem, including:

- state-to-state cooperation and national SSTC strategies;
- regional and subregional cooperation mechanisms;
- UN-facilitated technical cooperation;
- triangular cooperation involving a third partner such as a donor, UN agency or development bank;
- public development bank-supported programmes;
- civil society-led peer learning and regional networking;
- provider and facilitator country civil society engagement in development cooperation policy.

The case evidence is qualitative. It is used to identify patterns, contribution and policy lessons rather than to claim strict causal attribution. Some cases show where civil society improved cooperation quality. Some show where peer learning moved knowledge across borders. Some show the cost of exclusion. Others show how provider or facilitator countries could institutionalise civil society participation.

# How to read the report – chapter roadmap

- Chapter 2 defines South-South and triangular cooperation, explains their political roots and contemporary relevance, and sets out why civil society matters.
- Chapter 3 analyses what makes SSTC effective and how civil society strengthens those conditions. Chapter 4 examines where current SSTC architecture gets stuck, including state-centric governance, limited transparency, financing gaps and political economy risks.
- Chapter 5 draws implications for the final years of the 2030 Agenda and for post-2030 debates.
- Chapter 6 provides recommendations and ready-to-use advocacy messages.
- The conclusion lands the core argument.
- The annex provides a concise case evidence matrix.



Forus members are not only observers of development cooperation. They are practitioners of peer learning, accountability, advocacy and locally led development.



Chapter 2

# What South-South and Triangular Cooperation Is – and Why Civil Society Matters

## From Bandung to the present: Historical and political roots

South-South cooperation did not emerge as a technical funding modality. It emerged as a political project. Its roots lie in the efforts of newly independent states to assert sovereignty, challenge externally-imposed development paradigms, and build cooperation based shared histories, structural challenges and aspirations for self-determination.

From the Bandung Conference of 1955, through the Non-Aligned Movement established in 1961, the Group of 77 in 1964, the Buenos Aires Plan of Action in 1978, the Nairobi Outcome Document in 2009 and BAPA+4 in 2019, South-South cooperation carried an important political promise: development knowledge should not flow in only one direction. Countries of the Global South are not merely recipients of expertise. They are producers of knowledge, policy innovation, solidarity and solutions.

This history matters because the central questions remain political: whose knowledge counts, who defines development, who has power in cooperation relationships, and who is accountable to whom. South-South cooperation is therefore not simply "aid by another name". It is a claim about power, legitimacy, and the possibility of more horizontal forms of international cooperation.

At the same time, today's SSTC landscape is more complex than its founding principles suggest. It is shaped by the rise of BRICS+, the expansion of China's Belt and Road Initiative, India's development partnership programme, Brazil's cooperation frameworks Turkey's expanding role, regional blocs, public development banks and strategic competition involving the United States, the European Union, Russia and other actors. Civil society engagement must be grounded in this reality. SSTC should be defended for its potential, but scrutinised for its risks.



# Definitions and distinctions: South-south cooperation, triangular cooperation, and how they differ from traditional aid

South-South cooperation refers to a wide range of relations and practices between developing states, such as policy exchange, technical cooperation, peer learning, capacity building, collaborative problem solving, political coordination, and other aspects of solidarity. It can include bilateral cooperation, regional cooperation, technical assistance, policy dialogue, training, peer learning, joint research, financial cooperation, humanitarian support and political coordination. What makes South-South cooperation different is not a specific form of institutional arrangement but certain principles of collaboration. They include reciprocity, equality between partners ("horizontality"), contextual relevancy, value for ownership, and inclination for exchange between actors having similar development experiences.

South-South and Triangular Cooperation involves at least three partners. Typically, two or more Southern partners lead the substance of the cooperation, while a third partner - often a traditional donor, UN agency, development bank, emerging economy or international organisation - provides financing, convening power, technical support or broader partnership infrastructure. . This model aims at achieving a balance between an appropriate relevancy and peer nature of South-South cooperation and bringing new resources into this process. Ideally, it is the third actor which enables this process and does not lead it.

South-South and triangular cooperation differ from traditional North-South aid in several ways. They place stronger emphasis on reciprocity, shared experience, mutual benefit, non-conditionality, respect for national ownership and peer exchange. They often seek practical solutions adapted from contexts that face comparable constraints. They can also be more politically resonant because cooperation partners may share histories of colonialism, structural inequality or development challenges. While North-South cooperation cannot be seen simply as worse or better, the case for SSTC is not that the former should replace the latter, but complement it with new approaches.

But the distinction should not be overstated.

SSTC can also reproduce vertical dynamics if one partner dominates, if communities are excluded, if financing is opaque, or if political and commercial interests override rights, inclusion and accountability. The question is therefore not whether SSTC is automatically better than traditional cooperation. The question is what makes it work well.

# Scale and contemporary significance

The growth in South-South cooperation has been significant. In 2024,**South-South trade was USD 6.2 trillion in 2024 (UNCTAD Handbook of Statistics 2025)**. Over time, South-South trade has increased its share of total merchandise trade from 11% in 2000 to 26% in 2024.Triangular cooperation has also expanded. OECD and Islamic Development Bank reporting shows that, among 33 OECD-DAC members, 18 reported triangular cooperation activities at least once between 2016 and 2023, together totalling more than 3,000 activities. A notable example is the 2025 project of China supporting climate resilience to the partner states in Africa and Asia with funding of 24.5 billion to support green infrastructure and disaster readiness. This kind of cooperation is not marginal anymore; it is becoming an integral part of development cooperation globally. The OECD also notes that reporting remains partial and that many contributions are not monetised or fully reflected in official data (OECD and IsDB, 2025).

Beyond trade and reported programmes, SSTC includes knowledge exchange, regional learning, policy cooperation, capacity strengthening and locally grounded exchange that official statistics often fail to capture. This is particularly true for civil society. A national NGO platform sharing SDG monitoring methods with a peer platform in another country may not appear in any national SSTC database. A regional civil society network facilitating learning on public finance accountability may not be counted as cooperation infrastructure. Yet these exchanges can directly influence development practice.

This matters because what is not counted is often not funded. If civil society-facilitated peer learning is invisible in SSTC systems, it remains dependent on fragile project funding, voluntary labour or ad hoc network relationships. Recognising it is not a symbolic act; it is a precondition for resourcing and scaling what already works.



# Civil society's distinctive contribution

Civil society organisations and platforms across the globe bring to SSTC what governments, development banks, and multilateral institutions cannot easily provide on their own.

The following sections highlight six ways in which civil society contributes to SSTC.

1

**Civil society as knowledge producer**

Civil society produces knowledge rooted in lived experience. Governments and international institutions often work with aggregate data, national plans and technical assessments. Civil society adds the community-level evidence that reveals who is missing, which groups are not being reached, and what barriers affect implementation. In Senegal, CONGAD (**Conseil des ONG d'Appui au Développement**), Senegal's national civil society platform's inclusive data advocacy helped identify gaps affecting women, children, persons with disabilities and local farmers, contributing to stronger SDG monitoring and government commitments under the Inclusive Data Charter.

CCOAIB - Conseil de Concertation des Organisations d'Appui aux Initiatives de Base contributed to Rwanda's 2023 VNR preparation, which was one of only 38% of VNR presenters that year to include a genuinely multi-stakeholder civil society process — bringing together government, private sector, civil society, and development partners. Rwanda also holds a dual position as both an SSTC recipient and an emerging SSTC provider within the East African Community, which means 's community-level evidence is strategically relevant in both directions of cooperation flow: informing what Rwanda receives and what it shares.

The Government of Tanzania runs a large bilateral portfolio, receiving cooperation from China and India among others, yet TANGO 's (The Tanzania Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (TANGO) is one of Tanzania's largest and longest-standing national NGO umbrella platforms, established in 1988 by 22 founding organizations. As a member of Forus, TANGO works to strengthen civil society coordination, advocacy, and people-centred development in Tanzania, promoting values of justice, human rights, gender equality, good governance, and sustainable development.) community-level monitoring knowledge — on what SSTC programmes have and have not reached — is not connected to any formal SSTC programme review mechanism. In both cases, civil society evidence supplements and corrects government headline data, and the resulting information base would be more relevant for both SSTC programme design and national accountability if it were formally recognised and used.

**Case Study**

## Senegal — CONGAD | Inclusive data as a foundation for better cooperation

CONGAD's SDG data advocacy — organising multi-stakeholder workshops reaching over 200 community members and 40 civil society organisations — led to the Government of Senegal committing to the Inclusive Data Charter in 2021, explicitly naming CONGAD as responsible for citizen monitoring of the SDGs. Two Senegalese ministries revised data practices as a direct result. The approach has been documented by the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data as a South-South peer learning reference for other countries. Civil society made SSTC more effective without being formally included in SSTC governance.

2

### Civil society transcends scale

Civil society connects scales. National platforms can translate local experience into national policy messages and connect those messages to regional or global debates. They bridge communities, local governments, ministries, parliaments, UN actors and international advocacy spaces.

3

### Civil society as peer-learning connector

CSOs facilitate horizontal exchange between communities, organisations, and platforms in ways that formal state-to-state mechanisms cannot replicate. Forus members often exchange practical methods across borders: SDG monitoring approaches, VNR engagement strategies, participatory budgeting, public finance accountability, disaster resilience, civic space protection and localisation models. These exchanges are often more effective than one-way technical assistance because they are based on comparable realities and trust among peers.

Following two cases show what this looks like in practice.

**Case Study**

## Pacific — PIANGO - Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations |Vaka Pasifika | Regional civil society infrastructure as SSTC

PIANGO (the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations) is the regional civil society network for the Pacific, working through National Liaison Units in countries across the region. Through the EU-funded, UNDP-implemented Vaka Pasifika initiative — building on an earlier EU-funded public finance management programme implemented with PASAI and PIANGO — PIANGO has supported public finance accountability and citizen engagement across Pacific Island countries.

UNDP reports that this collaboration contributed to Citizen Budget Guides, budget consultations across eight Pacific countries, and the launch of an e-Budget Portal designed to make public finance information more accessible to citizens, civil society, governments and other stakeholders.

This is a strong SSTC example because it shows what happens when regional civil society infrastructure is properly resourced: knowledge does not move through a one-off training. It moves through a network that can adapt public finance tools to different island contexts, support peer learning between national platforms, and connect local civil society actors to regional accountability agendas. None of this appears in UNOSSC data. None receives dedicated SSTC financing.

**Case Study**

## Taiwan AID - Taiwan Alliance in International Development | Structured peer exchange and unmet demand for civil society learning

Taiwan AID is Taiwan's national platform for international development NGOs — Taiwan's first and only such platform, coordinating approximately 30 member organisations. Through its NGO Fellowship Programme, Taiwan AID connects NGO professionals from South Asia, Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia and the Pacific with Taiwanese civil society organisations for structured peer exchange.

The demand for this kind of civil society-to-civil society South-South learning is documented and striking: one recent programme cycle received 1,372 applications, compared with 172 in the previous year — a nearly eightfold increase in a single cycle. This surge in applications is itself evidence of what official SSTC systems are not providing: structured, horizontal, peer-driven capacity exchange grounded in Asian development experience rather than Northern donor models.



## 4

### Civil society knows how to adapt projects to their contexts

Civil society supports contextual adaptation. SSTC works best when ideas are adapted, not copied. Civil society can help identify what conditions made a practice work in one context and what needs to change before it can work elsewhere.

**Case Study**

## Guatemala — CONGCOOP | Civil society adaptation in South–South agroecology exchange

In Guatemala, CONGCOOP (**Coordinación de ONG y Cooperativas**) has developed community-based agroecology methodologies through decades of practice in the western highlands — a region marked by high levels of chronic malnutrition and diverse ecological conditions. These methodologies are not generic "best practices" but are grounded in specific local realities, including communal land tenure systems, indigenous governance structures, altitude-specific farming, and crop diversity.

In the LAC region, CONGCOOP shares this experience with ASONOG (**Asociacion De Organismos No Gubernamentales (**Honduras) and **ANC - Asociación Nacional de Centros** (Peru) in horizontal, peer-to-peer exchanges. What distinguishes these exchanges is not only knowledge transfer but **explicit adaptation**: participants collectively analyse which elements are transferable and which depend on local conditions — such as watershed management systems in Honduras or highland food sovereignty practices in Peru.

This is the critical function civil society performs in South–South cooperation: translating lived, community-level experience into context-sensitive approaches. Formal SSC programmes, operating primarily through government-to-government channels, rarely incorporate this level of granular adaptation, limiting their effectiveness in diverse local contexts.

## 5

### Civil society as accountability monitor

Civil society monitors impacts and raises accountability concerns. It can document when cooperation fails to reach communities, creates environmental or social harm, or excludes affected groups. Through ProSAVANA, a triangular cooperation programme involving the national platforms of CSOs in Mozambique (**Joint - League For NGOs in Mozambique**), Brazil (**ABONG — the Brazilian Association of Non-Governmental Organisations**), and Japan (**JANIC — Japan NGO Center for International Cooperation**), was launched in 2009 to support agricultural development in Mozambique's Nacala Corridor.

Civil society organisations and movements in Mozambique, Brazil and Japan raised sustained concerns about land rights, transparency, community consultation and the attempted transfer of an agro-industrial model to smallholder farming contexts. In May 2013, Mozambican civil society organisations and movements addressed an open letter to the Presidents of Mozambique and Brazil and the Prime Minister of Japan, warning that the programme would affect an estimated 14.5 million hectares across 19 districts in Niassa, Nampula and Zambézia.

The lesson is not that triangular cooperation is inherently harmful but that without meaningful participation of affected communities and civil society accountability actors can lock in design assumptions that become politically costly, socially contested and difficult to correct. Civil society monitoring is therefore not a threat to cooperation. It is a risk-management and quality-assurance function.

## 6 Civil society as co-governance actor

Civil society can act as a co-governance actor. In stronger models, civil society is not only consulted after decisions are taken. It is part of governance design, implementation oversight and policy learning, helping ensure that community knowledge shapes design decisions before they become irreversible. **KCOC - Korea NGO Council for Overseas Development Cooperations** and **PIANGO - Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations**'s Vaka Pasifika programme (a regional capacity-strengthening initiative for Pacific civil society) are the two clearest benchmarks of institutionalised co-governance inside development cooperation systems. KCOC demonstrates co-governance within a provider country's ODA architecture, embedding civil society into policy design, monitoring and evaluation cycles. **INFID - International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development**, Indonesia's national CSO platform and Forus member) chairing the G20 Civil 20 process during Indonesia's 2022 Presidency represents the function at the highest level of global standard-setting. These are not isolated instances — they are the proof of concept that structural inclusion is achievable.



**Case Study**

## Indonesia — INFID / Civil 20 | Civil society shaping a Southern-led global process

INFID (the International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development) is Indonesia's national development NGO forum and a Forus member. During Indonesia's 2022 G20 Presidency, INFID was appointed Chair of Civil 20 (C20) — the official G20 civil society engagement group — and coordinated hundreds of civil society organisations from around the world across seven working areas: SDGs and humanitarian action; vaccine access and global health; gender equality and disability; taxation and sustainable finance; environment, climate justice and energy transition; education, digitalisation and civic space; and anti-corruption. C20 recommendations were formally submitted to the G20 summit. This case shows what structural civil society inclusion in a Southern-led global process looks like in practice: civil society not as a passive observer or side-event participant, but as a formally recognised actor coordinating global policy positions and submitting recommendations to the world's most powerful economic forum during a Global South presidency. For SSTC, the lesson is direct: Indonesia's role as a G20 host and significant South-South cooperation provider creates an entry point for civil society to shape both global standards and bilateral cooperation governance — an entry point INFID has demonstrated can be used.

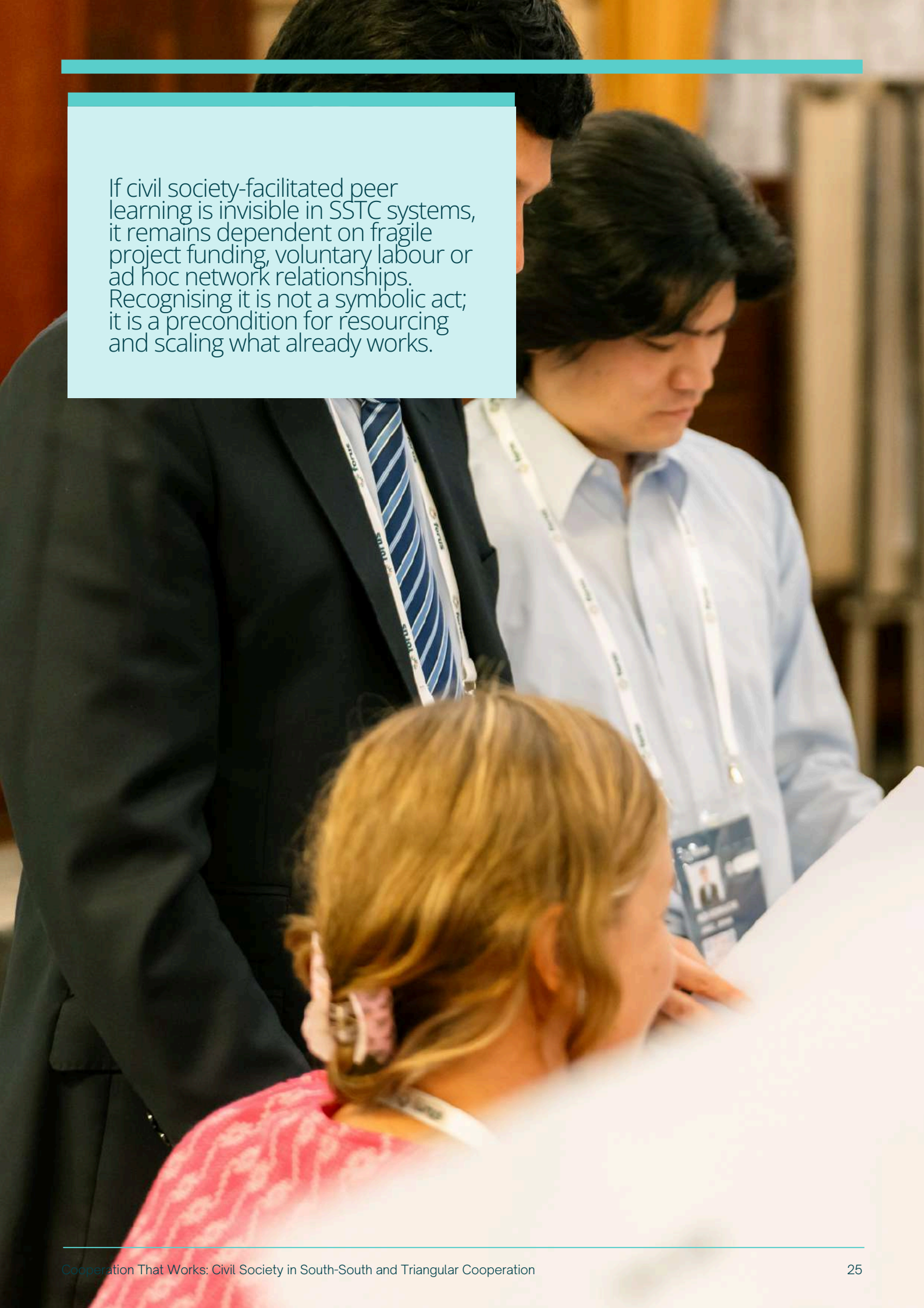
**Case Study**

## South Korea — KCOC - Korea NGO Council for Overseas Development Cooperations | Civil society co-governance in the provider country

KCOC (Korea NGO Council for Overseas Development Cooperation) is South Korea's national platform of development NGOs and a Forus member. Through a multi-phase process between civil society and government, KCOC helped institutionalise civil society participation in Korea's development cooperation system, moving from consultation to structured co-governance. Following OECD DAC recommendations, a formal Policy Framework for Partnership between government and civil society was jointly developed and embedded in Korea's 3rd Mid-Term Strategy for Development Cooperation, ensuring institutional continuity for CSO engagement in ODA governance.

This framework established regular government–civil society policy consultations, joint monitoring mechanisms, and a set of implementation tasks agreed between both sides, many of which were subsequently assessed as achieved or partially achieved in a 2026 review. In parallel, civil society engagement also enabled KOICA (Korea International Cooperation Agency )-supported South-South cooperation programming, including COVID-19 response projects delivered through Korean NGOs in multiple developing countries.

This case demonstrates that civil society can move from an implementing contractor role to a formal co-design and oversight actor within a provider country's SSC/ODA architecture — creating a replicable governance model for other development cooperation systems.



If civil society-facilitated peer learning is invisible in SSTC systems, it remains dependent on fragile project funding, voluntary labour or ad hoc network relationships. Recognising it is not a symbolic act; it is a precondition for resourcing and scaling what already works.

Chapter 3

# What Makes South-South and Triangular Cooperation Effective – and How Civil Society Strengthens It

The case studies reviewed for this report points to several conditions that make SSTC more effective: trust, contextual relevance, adaptation, evidence, accountability and continuity.

Civil society strengthens each of these conditions because it works close to communities, connects experience across contexts, and helps identify risks that may not be visible in state-to-state cooperation processes. The following sections show how civil society participation can improve cooperation quality, while also highlighting what is lost when participation is weak or absent.

## Trust and peer relationships

Effective SSTC relies heavily on trust among peer organisations. Unlike the usual donor-recipient relationships characterised by reporting requirements and power asymmetries, this peer relationships enable honest problem-sharing where partners unreservedly acknowledge challenges and failures, creating space for genuine learning.

Civil society platforms can help build this trust because they often operate through long-term relationships rather than short-term projects. National NGO platforms know the political, social and institutional realities of their countries. Regional coalitions know how issues move across borders. Global civil society networks such as Forus can connect members who face similar challenges but would not otherwise have structured opportunities to exchange. For example, in the case of KCOC, Korean civil society emerged as a co-designer within the country's development cooperation system through a sustained, multi-phase institutionalisation process, involving civil society evaluation, OECD DAC engagement, joint policy framework development, and ongoing implementation and monitoring. This transition was made possible by structured and continuous dialogue between government and civil society, maintained across electoral cycles and embedded in formal policy frameworks. The same principle of trust applies at the regional level:

PIANGO's NLU network in the Pacific functions because national civil society organisations can speak candidly about what is not working, before international partners identify it through formal monitoring.

Trust is particularly important where official cooperation is politically sensitive. In contexts affected by conflict, transition or shrinking civic space, civil society peers may be able to share strategies, risks and protection approaches in ways that formal state-to-state exchanges cannot. This does not replace government cooperation, but it complements it with channels that are more grounded and often more candid.

# Shared context and comparable challenges

SSTC works because partners often recognise themselves in each other's constraints. A local government dealing with limited fiscal space may learn more from a peer facing similar constraints than from a model designed in a high-income country. A civil society platform working on SDG monitoring in a decentralised setting may find practical value in another platform's experience with local data, community consultations or VNR engagement.

In Central America, CONGCOOP in Guatemala participates in peer learning exchanges with platforms such as ASONOG in Honduras on food security, agroecology, and rural development. Because these organisations operate in comparable agricultural and governance contexts, lessons emerging from one country can be adapted quickly by others.

**Case Study**

## Rwanda — CCOAIB - Conseil de Concertation des Organisations d'Appui aux Initiatives de Base / Shared context as a bidirectional SSTC asset

CCOAIB (the Conseil de Concertation des Organisations d'Appui aux Initiatives de Base) is Rwanda's Forus member platform and holds a structurally distinctive position in African SSTC: Rwanda is simultaneously an SSTC recipient — receiving cooperation from China, India, Morocco and South Africa documented in its 2023 VNR — and an emerging SSTC provider within the East African Community. This dual position means CCOAIB's community-level evidence matters in both directions: when Rwanda receives SSTC, CCOAIB can assess whether incoming technical cooperation reflects community realities; when Rwanda provides SSTC to neighbours, CCOAIB holds the community-grounded knowledge of what actually worked domestically. Rwanda's 2023 VNR was among only 38% of VNR presenters that year to include a genuinely multi-stakeholder civil society process including CCOAIB's inputs. This is shared-context SSTC at its most concrete: civil society knowledge that travels because it is rooted in comparable East African governance realities.

The case evidence suggests that civil society peer learning is most useful when it focuses on concrete implementation questions: how to convene communities safely, how to work with ministries, how to collect citizen-generated data, how to translate local experience into national reporting, how to engage parliaments, how to protect civic space while participating in official processes, and how to sustain collaboration when funding is short.

# Adaptation, not mechanical replication

One of the biggest risks in development cooperation is the assumption that a model can be replicated without translation. South-South cooperation is sometimes presented as more context-sensitive than traditional aid, but it can still fall into the trap of copying policies, technologies or programme designs without sufficient adaptation.

Civil society reduces this risk by asking practical questions: Who benefits? Who is excluded? What local institutions are needed? What political assumptions does this model make? What resources are required? What risks are created for communities? What safeguards are needed? What must be changed for the model to make sense here?

**Case Study**

## Japan — JANIC - Japan NGO Center for International Cooperation / Triangular cooperation accountability: provider-country civil society as cross-border watchdog

JANIC (Japan NGO Center for International Cooperation) is Japan's Forus member platform and a significant actor in Japan's triangular cooperation governance. Japan is one of the world's most active triangular cooperation facilitators, with programmes across Africa, Asia and the Pacific. The ProSAVANA case — the Japan-Brazil-Mozambique agricultural cooperation programme that transferred the wrong model for Mozambican smallholder farmers — illustrates both the risk and the remedy. Members of JANIC were part of the three-country civil society accountability coalition, alongside JOINT (Mozambique) and ABONG (Brazil), that documented community harm and ultimately contributed to programme suspension after years of implementation without community consent. Beyond ProSAVANA, JANIC engages Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) policy processes and JICA governance structures, advocating for civil society inclusion standards in Japanese triangular cooperation design. Provider-country civil society that holds its own government's cooperation to account — before programmes are designed and during implementation — is a fundamental accountability function that no recipient-country mechanism can replicate.



# Evidence, data and learning systems

Effective cooperation depends on good evidence. Yet official data often misses groups that are excluded from services, consultations or decision-making. Civil society can strengthen data systems by producing community-based evidence, identifying gaps, validating assumptions and connecting qualitative experience to policy processes.

In SDG implementation, this role is especially important. Voluntary National Reviews and national SDG reports often depend on government data systems that may not capture the full experience of marginalised groups. Civil society shadow reporting, citizen-generated data and community consultations can make the evidence base more complete. When this knowledge is shared across countries, it becomes a form of South-South learning.

This report therefore recommends that national SSTC strategies, VNRs and UNOSSC knowledge platforms recognise civil society-generated evidence and civil society-facilitated peer learning as part of the cooperation ecosystem. This would help move civil society knowledge from the margins of cooperation reporting into the systems that influence policy and financing. For future editions of this report, additional cases from West African countries or the DRC could be developed if they can meet the evidentiary standard required: a concrete, sourceable civil society contribution to cooperation quality, peer learning, accountability or governance.

# Transparency, accountability and rights-holders

SSTC is often framed around solidarity and mutual benefit. These principles are important, but they do not remove the need for transparency and accountability. Cooperation projects can still affect land, livelihoods, public services, environmental resources, debt sustainability, labour rights, civic space and marginalised communities. When transparency and accountability mechanisms are weak, affected people may have little recourse.

Civil society can monitor whether cooperation is reaching intended groups, whether harms are emerging, and whether excluded communities are being left behind. This monitoring function is valuable to rights-holders, but it is also valuable to governments and institutions that want cooperation to succeed.

Civil society provides accountability in several ways. It monitors implementation. It documents impacts. It raises early warnings. It supports affected communities to organise and speak. It brings rights-based analysis into technical cooperation. It can also help governments and institutions course-correct before problems become crises.

For governments and funders, this is not a threat. It is a risk-management function. Civil society participation can help identify implementation problems early, improve legitimacy, reduce conflict and strengthen public trust.

# Continuity and resourcing

Effective peer learning requires continuity. Short exchanges can be useful, but sustained learning usually depends on relationships, building trust, follow-up, adaptation, documentation and feedback loops. Civil society networks often provide this continuity, but their SSTC functions are rarely funded as such.

The cases suggest that civil society-led peer learning is often carried out through existing organisational budgets, voluntary time or project funding designed for other purposes. This makes the work fragile and difficult to scale. If governments, UN agencies and funders want SSTC to become more effective, they need to resource the relationships and networks that make peer learning possible.

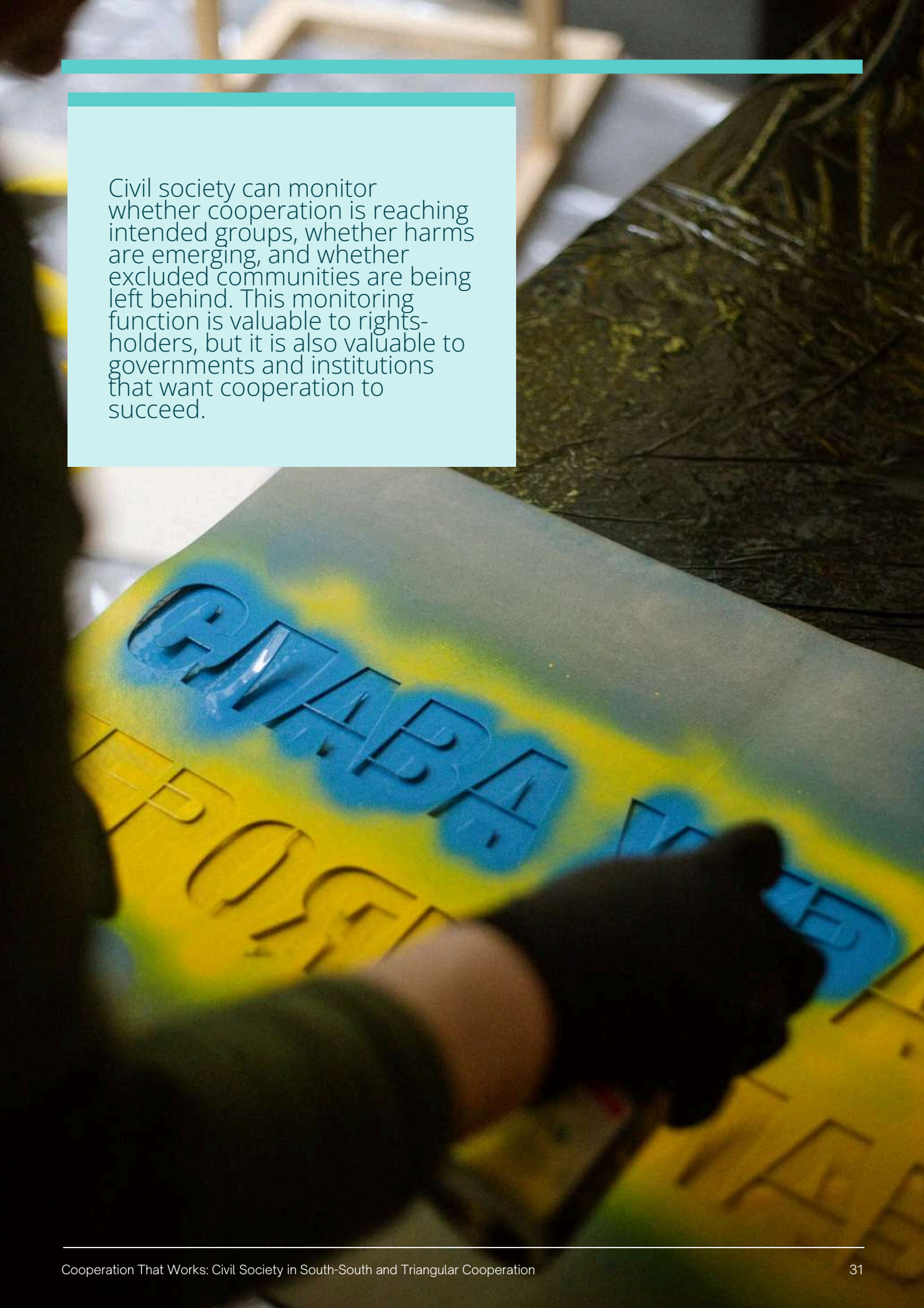
**Case Study**

## Latvia — LAPAS (Latvijas Platforma attīstības sadarbībai, / Civil society facilitated peer learning

In Latvia, LAPAS (Latvijas Platforma attīstības sadarbībai, Latvia's Forus member platform for development cooperation) has sustained civil society engagement with Latvia's development cooperation policy across multiple government coalition changes since 2012 — by embedding civil society consultation in the legal framework governing Latvia's ODA, rather than depending on the goodwill of individual ministers. This is continuity by institutional design: once participation is required by law, it persists regardless of electoral cycles. The lesson applies to SSTC globally: civil society-facilitated peer learning that depends on project funding or personal relationships is inherently fragile. Civil society participation embedded in governance architecture, as LAPAS has secured in Latvia, is far more resilient.



Civil society can monitor whether cooperation is reaching intended groups, whether harms are emerging, and whether excluded communities are being left behind. This monitoring function is valuable to rights-holders, but it is also valuable to governments and institutions that want cooperation to succeed.



Chapter 4

# Where Current SSTC Architecture Gets Stuck – and What Needs to Change

From state-centric cooperation to multi-stakeholder design

Many SSTC strategies, programmes and reporting systems are still designed around governments, cooperation agencies, development banks and multilateral institutions. Civil society may be invited to consultations, asked to implement activities or mobilised for visibility, but rarely included in decision-making, financing or monitoring structures.

Across the 20 cases reviewed, meaningful civil society participation in formal SSTC governance remains the exception rather than the rule. In most cases, civil society contributes evidence, peer learning, monitoring or implementation support, but these contributions are not systematically recognised in formal programme governance, financing or reporting. The issue is therefore not a lack of civil society capacity. It is an architectural gap in how SSTC is designed.

## The cost of exclusion vs the value of inclusion

The cases reviewed show several recurring costs of exclusion.

**First, cooperation becomes less evidence-informed.** Without civil society input, programme designers may rely too heavily on official data or high-level assumptions. This can hide the experiences of women, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, displaced communities, informal workers, rural communities and other groups who are often missing from national averages. As such, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, details of six bilateral donors' contributions to the SSC program in the 2023 VNR, there is no process for these programs to reach the displaced population, despite an internally displaced population of over seven million people. In Senegal, the national platform of CSOs, CONGAD is already designing workshops aimed at finding gaps in data related to people with disabilities, women, and smallholders. This program has already yielded tangible results with direct changes in two ministry data systems. It is the knowledge producing function of civil society performed in a most palpable manner, which can be replicated through Forus member organizations in any country.

**Case Study**

## DR Congo — CNONGD- Conseil National des ONGD de Développement / Civil society exclusion in South–South cooperation governance

CNONGD is the Democratic Republic of the Congo's national NGO platform and a Forus member. The DRC's 2023 Voluntary National Review (VNR) documents multiple bilateral South–South cooperation (SSC) partnerships with China, India, Morocco, Rwanda and South Africa. However, none of these frameworks formally include CNONGD in programme governance.

This exclusion is significant in a country hosting over 7 million internally displaced people. CNONGD's nationwide network provides granular knowledge on displacement patterns, gaps between humanitarian and development interventions, and community-level accountability. Without this input, SSC programmes risk relying on incomplete information about needs and targeting.

While project-level impacts are not systematically documented in the VNR, humanitarian reporting in the DRC consistently highlights coordination, targeting and accountability challenges—gaps that align with the absence of structured civil society engagement.

This reflects a broader trend: only 38% of countries presenting VNRs in 2023 described their SDG institutional arrangements as genuinely multi-stakeholder.

The CONGAD case in Senegal already documented in Chapter 2 , shows what a difference civil society inclusion makes when it does happen: community workshops identifying SDG data gaps for marginalised populations led directly to two ministries revising their data systems and to a national commitment to the Inclusive Data Charter. That outcome was produced by civil society doing what SSTC systems are not resourced to do.

**Second, cooperation becomes less adaptive.** Without community feedback, models are transferred mechanically, without sufficient attention to political economy, local institutions, rights, culture or community realities. VANI (Voluntary Action Network India), India's Forus member platform, holds detailed community-level knowledge across key development sectors. Given that India's South–South cooperation (SSC) is rooted in its domestic development trajectory, limited integration of VANI in cooperation frameworks risks weakening the contextual relevance and accountability of exported models. See Section 4.3 for a detailed case.

**Third, cooperation becomes less accountable.** If affected communities cannot access information, raise concerns or influence monitoring, risks accumulate. In triangular cooperation, this is particularly important because accountability may be dispersed across several countries and institutions, these risks are amplified. The ProSAVANA case (in chapter 3) illustrates how cross-border civil society coordination can partially fill these gaps—but typically from outside formal governance structures rather than being institutionally embedded.

Such engagement is not systematic. The Cabo Verde case illustrates the implications when civil society is not integrated at all. PLATONG (**Plataforma das ONGs de Cabo Verde**), Forus's, national NGO platform, operates across dispersed island communities. The IBSA Fund's water project which was implemented with government and UNDP partners, is widely cited as a successful triangular cooperation initiative, improving access to drinking water. Yet available documentation does not indicate a formal role for PLATONG in programme design, implementation, or governance.

As the national civil society platform, PLATONG holds community-level knowledge on service access, local constraints, and user experience across islands. In its absence, there is no structured mechanism to incorporate this knowledge into programme decisions, nor to provide independent, community-based validation of programme reach and outcomes. This reflects a broader feature of some triangular cooperation modalities: even where results are achieved, the lack of institutionalised civil society participation limits accountability and learning.

**Fourth, cooperation becomes less sustainable.** Projects that do not build local civil society ownership may produce short-term outputs but fail to sustain results after external support ends. This is especially acute in fragile or transitional contexts. In Burkina Faso, SPONG (**Secrétariat Permanent des ONG du Burkina Faso**) a Forus' member platform, is operating under one of the world's most severe civic space restrictions following the 2022 coup. In Guinea, FONGDD (**Forum des ONG pour le Développement Durable**) another Forus' member operates in a context of political transition and shrinking civic space. In both countries, and in the DRC, SSTC flows continue and expand. Yet without formal civil society participation, there is no community-level accountability to ensure support reaches those most in need or that results are sustained beyond the programme.

*The above three cases illustrate a specific, concrete points in contexts of crisis and political transition, cooperation governance standards that depend on national authority discretion will fail to protect civil society participation. What each platform does is documented in the case study annex; the point here is structural, not anecdotal.)*



**Fifth, cooperation becomes less legitimate.** In contexts where trust in institutions is low, civil society participation builds public confidence. Excluding civil society deepens the perception that cooperation is elite-driven and disconnected from community needs — particularly damaging in contexts where SSTC is already seen as a vehicle for geopolitical interest rather than mutual development.

Where civic space is restricted, regional, UN and funder-supported cooperation should include explicit safeguards for civil society participation, protection of civil society actors, transparency and independent monitoring. This is not interference in sovereign cooperation arrangements. It is a minimum condition for cooperation that claims to serve sustainable development and leave no one behind.

Where civil society is formally involved in SSTC governance, the evidence shows four concrete improvements: better community targeting, faster contextual adaptation, stronger local ownership, and measurable accountability outcomes.

The most clearly documented quantitative example is KCOC's, presented in Chapter 2. KCOC's multi-phase institutionalisation process (documented in detail in the annex and Chapter 2 box) moved Korean civil society from implementing less than 2% of Korea's ODA as contractors to participating in the co-design of development cooperation frameworks. A documented outcome includes 51 civil society organisations supporting health systems in 30 countries through a KOICA cooperation fund of 10 billion Korean won (Korea International Cooperation Agency, 2022).

PIANGO's Vaka Pasifika results are documented in the Chapter 3 box: Citizen Budget Guides, budget consultations across eight Pacific countries and the launch of an e-Budget Portal (UNDP Pacific, December 2025) — outcomes that required sustained regional civil society infrastructure, not a one-off project. CONGAD's data advocacy led to two Senegalese ministries revising their data systems, documented in Chapter 2.

> The point these cases together establish is direct: civil society inclusion in SSTC governance produces results that exclusion makes impossible.

# Financing gaps and the invisibility of civil society SSTC

Civil society-led SSTC is often invisible because it does not fit the categories used by official cooperation systems. This does not mean civil society is absent from development cooperation in practice. On the contrary, civil society actors are often producing evidence, facilitating peer learning, supporting implementation and monitoring impacts. A peer exchange between two national NGO platforms may not be counted as a cooperation activity. A regional civil society network may not be recognised as infrastructure. A community-generated data process may not be funded as part of development cooperation, even when it improves national planning. The problem is that these contributions are rarely built into SSTC governance, financing, reporting or accountability systems.

Much civil society-led peer learning is not formally recognised as SSTC. It may happen through regional networks, Forus working groups, VNR collaboration, climate adaptation exchanges, public finance advocacy or peer solidarity in civic space crises. Yet because it is not counted, it is rarely funded.

This creates a paradox. Civil society is already performing functions that make SSTC more effective, but those functions are treated as informal or secondary. Governments and institutions benefit from the knowledge generated, but the infrastructure that produces it remains under-resourced. Instead of claiming that civil society SSTC is always cheaper or more cost-effective than traditional cooperation, the safer and stronger argument is that it is under-recognised infrastructure. It helps knowledge travel, supports adaptation, and strengthens accountability. Funding this work is therefore an investment in cooperation quality. Closing this gap is not only a civil society demand. It is a practical way to improve the effectiveness, legitimacy and sustainability of SSTC. Evidence suggests that peer-to-peer and South-South learning methods can foster ownership and problem-solving capacity in comparison to traditional technical assistance, and are often considered more cost-efficient due to lesser reliance on external experts and high-cost delivery models, even if cost comparisons fluctuate by context.

**Case Study**

## Kiribati — KANGO- Kiribati Association of NGOs | Climate existential crisis SSTC — PIANGO network as the only viable channel

For Kiribati, facing potential inundation, climate adaptation peer learning is not a development preference but a survival question. KANGO (Kiribati Association of Non-Governmental Organisations) operates in a context where access to international climate finance processes and regional governance platforms is often limited for national civil society actors. In this context, regional coordination through PIANGO provides an important channel for peer learning and exchange, including access to experience from countries such as Fiji and Samoa. The argument for resourcing PIANGO, and by extension other regional civil society platforms in SIDS contexts, is therefore a strong case for strengthening South–South cooperation capacity. Supporting such regional networks enables shared learning and coordination across multiple Pacific Island countries simultaneously, in contexts where climate adaptation is an urgent and existential priority.

# Power Dynamics and Equity

SSTC is often described in the language of horizontality, cooperation between equals, solidarity over conditionality, mutual benefit over donor-recipient hierarchy. But horizontal language does not automatically remove power asymmetries. Larger emerging economies like China, India, Brazil, South Africa, have more resources, technical capacity and geopolitical influence than the LDCs, SIDS and crisis-affected countries that receive their cooperation. Without civil society, there is no independent actor whose function is to ask: who is setting the agenda, who is benefiting, who is carrying the risk, and who can challenge decisions when cooperation goes wrong?



**Regional intergovernmental organisations** shape the enabling environment for SSTC through regional cooperation strategies, SDG forums, technical exchange platforms and peer-learning processes. They determine what issues are prioritised, how countries learn from each other, and whether cooperation is treated as intergovernmental or multi-stakeholder. Civil society platforms that engage these spaces bring community evidence and accountability perspectives that intergovernmental processes alone cannot generate.

**Public development banks and development finance institutions** shape SSTC-linked investments through financing conditions, safeguards, accountability mechanisms and investment standards. When civil society is excluded, SSTC-linked investments are designed without adequate community evidence or feedback mechanisms. Civil society platforms have increasingly sought to engage Southern-led financial institutions to strengthen transparency and accountability. For example, VANI-Voluntary Action Network India (India), Abong - Associaçao Brasileira de ONGs (Brazil), African Monitor and Forus have collectively engaged the BRICS-led New Development Bank, advocating for the establishment of a formal civil society engagement mechanism aligned with international accountability standards. This illustrates how civil society can help ensure that development finance institutions better reflect the priorities and needs of affected communities in the context of South-South cooperation.




**Gender and intersectionality** must be embedded in SSTC design from the outset, not added as an afterthought. If SSTC programmes do not include a gendered and intersectional analysis, they will reproduce social hierarchies. KCOC's institutionalisation process and PIANGO's Vaka Pasifika programme, both documented in earlier chapters, demonstrate that when civil society is structurally involved in cooperation design, intersectional community needs are identified and addressed earlier, with measurable impact on programme reach to marginalised groups. This is a rights imperative and a matter of cooperation effectiveness.

Civil society helps make power dynamics visible. It can ask who sets the agenda, who benefits, who carries risk, and who can challenge decisions. It can ensure SSTC remains aligned with public interest, human rights, environmental sustainability and accountability to communities.

Various examples illustrate how provider-country civil society platforms fulfil this function on the supply side of cooperation.

**Case Study**

## Norway — ForUM | Provider-country civil society accountability through development cooperation policy

ForUM (**Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment**) is Norway's Forus member platform, and a good example of how civil society located in provider-countries can influence cooperation governance through policy engagement. Rather than focusing only on project-level monitoring, ForUM engages with the policy and financing frameworks that shape Norway's development cooperation. Through participation in OECD-DAC civil society consultation processes and through its role in CONCORD Europe, ForUM advocates for the integration of civil society perspectives and accountability standards in cooperation frameworks.

This approach reflects a form of systemic accountability: influencing upstream policy processes that affect multiple programmes, rather than engaging only at the project level. It demonstrates how provider-country civil society can contribute to strengthening governance and accountability in development cooperation through sustained policy engagement.

**Case Study**

## India — VANI | Present in mandate, absent in practice

VANI's own mandate explicitly includes embracing South-South Cooperation principles and integrating civil society into India's development cooperation — documented in its published programme description and research publication 'India's Global Footprints.' India is one of the world's largest SSTC providers, through ITEC, the India-UN Development Partnership Fund, and bilateral cooperation programmes spanning Africa and Asia. VANI is also a founding member of the Forum for Indian Development Cooperation (FIDC), which has organised civil society participation in assessments of Indian SSC projects. Yet VANI or FIDC are not formally included in the Ministry of External Affairs' governance structures for ITEC or the India-UN Development Partnership Fund.

Given that India's SSC model is grounded in sharing domestic development experience, the absence of civil society platforms such as VANI from programme design limits the extent to which community-level knowledge informs cooperation strategies. Strengthening such linkages would improve the quality and contextual grounding of India's role as a South–South knowledge partner.

**Case Study**

## The IBSA Fund / A Southern-Led Development Cooperation Model

Established by India, Brazil and South Africa in 2004, the IBSA (https://unsouthsouth.org/ibsafund/) Fund79 is one of the best-known institutional mechanisms for South-South cooperation. Managed through the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC), the Fund supports demand-driven development projects identified by partner countries themselves rather than shaped through external conditionalities.

The Fund has supported projects across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East in areas including food security, health, water access, renewable energy, agriculture and livelihoods. Its approach is based on principles of national ownership, mutual benefit and horizontal partnership among countries of the Global South. The IBSA Fund demonstrates that developing countries can act not only as aid recipients but also as development partners and knowledge contributors. At the same time, it also reflects a broader challenge across many South-South cooperation frameworks: while governments and technical institutions are central to implementation, civil society participation and community accountability mechanisms often remain limited. The experience highlights both the promise and the governance gaps of evolving South-South cooperation models.

Tackling these structural limitations are fundamental not only for improving current SSTC efforts, but for making the cooperation model fit for commitment in the final years of the 2030 Agenda and beyond.



Civil society helps make power dynamics visible. It can ask who sets the agenda, who benefits, who carries risk, and who can challenge decisions. It can ensure SSTC remains aligned with public interest, human rights, environmental sustainability and accountability to communities.

Chapter 5

# What the Evidence Means for the Final Years of the 2030 Agenda and Beyond

The evidence reviewed in this report points to a consistent finding: civil society already performs functions that make SSTC more effective.

However, civil society contributions to SSTC remain largely invisible in governance, financing and reporting systems. What that finding means for the final years of Agenda 2030 is clear. What it should mean for the development cooperation agenda that follows is beginning to take shape.

## What the evidence implies for the final years of Agenda 2030

With 2030 approaching, the question for governments, cooperation agencies and civil society networks is not whether SSTC has value, the case evidence establishes that it does, but whether current cooperation systems are organised to capture that value in the time remaining. Three gaps documented in this report directly constrain what is possible before 2030.

**First, civil society-led peer learning is already happening but is not counted or funded as SSTC.** The exchanges documented across this report, SDG monitoring methodologies, VNR engagement strategies, public finance accountability tools, climate adaptation approaches, move faster and at lower cost than conventional technical assistance precisely because they are grounded in peer trust and comparable constraints. Yet they are not visible in any UNOSSC dataset and receive no dedicated SSTC financing. This invisibility weakens not only civil society actors, but also the effectiveness, accountability and inclusiveness of SSTC itself. It also means that cooperation systems fail to capture learning that is already occurring and could be scaled. Governments preparing VNRs should report civil society contributions to peer learning and monitoring alongside state-to-state cooperation. Civil society shadow reports can identify where official reporting misses these contributions.

**Second, exclusion from SSTC governance has real and documented costs.** As Chapter 4 established, when civil society is absent from programme design, cooperation becomes less informed, less adaptive, less accountable and less sustainable. This is not a theoretical risk. In DRC, six bilateral SSTC partnerships documented in the 2023 VNR proceeded without any formal role for CNONGD despite the platform holding the only granular knowledge of which communities were displaced and where needs were unmet. In Burkina Faso and Guinea, SSTC flows continued under political transition while community oversight mechanisms collapsed. In triangular cooperation, the ProSAVANA case showed that when accountability is dispersed across multiple governments and agencies, with no civil society actor structurally positioned to ask whether communities were consulted, design errors compound until they become politically unsustainable. Inclusion is not a participation principle. It is a risk-management function.

**Third, regional civil society networks are cooperation infrastructure — and they are chronically under-resourced.** PIANGO's National Liaison Unit network enables peer learning across 15 Pacific Island countries simultaneously, including for platforms like KANGO , based in Kiribati, that cannot access climate finance governance through bilateral channels alone. Forus member platforms in West Africa share SDG monitoring and public finance methodologies through regional coordination at a fraction of the cost of external technical assistance. These networks do not run on goodwill alone. They require sustained resourcing. Funding **such networks** is an investment in the systems that allow knowledge to travel — not an administrative overhead.

# What the evidence implies for what comes after 2030

SSTC carries important principles for the future of development cooperation: horizontality, solidarity, mutual learning, national ownership and the recognition that expertise is not the exclusive property of high-income countries or large multilateral institutions. A post-2030 framework that takes these principles seriously would look meaningfully different from the current model.

But the evidence in this report also establishes that SSTC does not automatically deliver on those principles. Power asymmetries exist within the Global South. Geopolitical interests shape cooperation relationships. Opacity, elite capture and community exclusion are documented risks, not hypothetical ones. A future framework that learns from SSTC must carry its best principles — and correct its persistent weaknesses.



# Five design principles emerge from the case evidence across this report.



## Partnership over aid.

Cooperation framed as mutual learning and shared responsibility produces more durable outcomes than resource transfer through vertical donor-recipient relationships. KCOC and PIANGO (documented in Chapters 2 and 3) show what this looks like when it is institutionalised. ProSAVANA (Chapter 3) shows the cost when Southern communities have no formal voice in cooperation design, regardless of how many governments are at the table.



## Local leadership as architecture, not aspiration.

Local leadership must shape financing, governance, monitoring and accountability — not only appear in political language. This means creating genuine pathways for civil society platforms, local governments, community organisations and rights-holder groups to influence priorities and assess results, with particular attention to those most frequently marginalised: women, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and displaced communities. CONGAD's work (Chapter 2) demonstrated what is achievable when inclusive local participation is combined with methodological rigour. In contrast, CNONGD's structural exclusion in the DRC (Chapter 4) illustrated the high cost when such approaches are absent.



## Multi-stakeholder governance as the default.

Cooperation mechanisms must be designed with civil society participation from the outset — not consulted after decisions are made, not invited to implement after priorities are set. In contexts of crisis, transition and restricted civic space, as the cases from Burkina Faso, DRC and Guinea document in Chapter 4, civil society participation cannot be left to host government discretion. International SSTC governance standards must protect it as a non-negotiable design condition.

## Transparency as a precondition for accountability.

SSTC programmes must publish accessible information on objectives, partners, financing, expected results, safeguards and monitoring. Without information, participation cannot be meaningful regardless of how many consultation spaces are created. Transparency standards should cover goals, funding, implementation arrangements, timelines and evaluation findings, and should apply across all cooperation modalities, not only those subject to OECD-DAC reporting.

## Recognition and resourcing of civil society-facilitated peer learning.

The next framework must count, document and fund civil society-led SSTC. The most immediately actionable step is to create or expand dedicated windows within existing cooperation mechanisms, UN programmes and funder instruments to resource civil society-facilitated peer learning and multi-stakeholder SSTC. As policy discussions on broader cooperation architecture advance, civil society should advocate from the outset that any new governance structures include civil society organisations, local governments and rights-holder representatives, and not accept arrangements where that inclusion is treated as an afterthought once the architecture is set.



# The actors who can change this – and what each hold

The gaps documented in this report are not held by one institution or resolved by one policy change. They are distributed across the actors who design, finance, govern and report on development cooperation. Each holds a different lever — and each is therefore addressed differently in Chapter 6.

**National governments and SSTC lead institutions** are the primary architects of SSC. They design national cooperation strategies, negotiate agreements and decide how cooperation is governed and reported. They are therefore the actors who can institutionalise civil society participation in SSTC design, monitoring and VNR reporting, and who bear the most direct responsibility when cooperation programmes exclude affected communities.

**UNOSSC and UNDP** shape global narratives and knowledge systems around SSTC, and support many triangular cooperation initiatives at country and regional level. They are the actors best positioned to make civil society-led peer learning visible in official SSTC data, to update guidance to include community-based evidence, and to create flexible funding windows for civil society-facilitated cooperation — particularly in LDCs, SIDS and fragile contexts.

**Triangular cooperation providers and facilitators** — bilateral agencies, UN actors and other institutions that finance or convene triangular cooperation, determine whether civil society participation is built into programme design or added as an afterthought. ProSAVANA (Chapter 3) established what the absence of that requirement produces. Making civil society participation a funded design condition, **rather than** an optional consultation, is the **key** reform this group can make.

**Regional intergovernmental organisations** set the frameworks within which regional peer learning takes place , determining whether cooperation is structured as an intergovernmental or multi-stakeholder platform. Opening regional SSTC and SDG mechanisms to structured civil society participation is the change this group can make; without it, community evidence and accountability perspectives remain outside the spaces where regional cooperation priorities are shaped.

**Public development banks and development finance institutions** shape SSTC-linked investments through financing terms, safeguards and accountability mechanisms. When civil society is excluded from SSTC-linked investment design, communities affected by infrastructure, climate finance, food systems and public service programmes carry risks they had no role in assessing. Applying transparency, safeguard and community participation standards to SSTC-linked technical cooperation is the reform this group can make.

**Global development cooperation policy processes** — including SDG review, Financing for Development follow-up, UNOSSC/BAPA+ follow-up and post-2030 framework negotiations, shape the norms under which all other actors operate. Embedding civil society participation, civic space protection, transparency and accountability in the future cooperation agenda is the task this group holds. If future cooperation frameworks are designed around state-to-state reporting alone, community evidence and civil society accountability functions will remain structurally marginal regardless of what individual governments or agencies do.

**Forus members and civil society networks** are both subjects of this report's analysis and actors in the advocacy it calls for. The evidence documented here — of peer learning that goes uncounted, of governance gaps that remain unchallenged, of regional networks that function without adequate resourcing — must be named, documented and leveraged across across national, regional and global advocacy spaces. The task for Forus members is to make civil society-led SSTC visible: to map it, document it, and advocate for its recognition and resourcing in all forums where development cooperation is discussed.

# Digital Tools and Peer Learning Infrastructure

The geographic distances, travel costs, and visa constraints that historically limited South-South civil society exchanges have been significantly reduced by digital communication tools. PIANGO's coordination of 15 NLUs across the Pacific relies heavily on virtual convening, enabling KANGO (Kiribati) to access GCF peer learning from Fiji and Samoa without prohibitive travel costs. Taiwan AID's NGO Fellowship Program combines virtual preparation phases with in-person immersions — optimising in-person time for relationship-building while conducting orientation, methodology training, and follow-up virtually.

However, digital tools introduce their own access and equity challenges: unreliable connectivity in some contexts, language barriers in predominantly English-language digital knowledge management systems, and the relationship-building limitations of purely virtual exchanges. The evidence from the 20 cases suggests a hybrid model is optimal — anchoring relationships through periodic in-person exchanges while conducting ongoing peer learning digitally. Investing in accessible digital infrastructure for civil society platforms, including translated knowledge products and multilingual facilitation, is a prerequisite for digital tools to fulfil their potential as SSTC equalisers.

# South-South Solidarity on Financing Justice and Civic Space

The $4 trillion annual SDG financing gap reflects structural inequalities in the global financial system: limited domestic resource mobilisation capacity, debt burdens constraining public investment, insufficient development cooperation, illicit financial flows, and climate finance failing to reach frontline communities. The 26 cases document the financing dimension of civil society exclusion directly: KANGO cannot independently access GCF financing; PLATONG has no route into IBSA Fund governance; CNONGD cannot access the bilateral SSC flows documented in DRC's own VNR.

South-South cooperation creates opportunities for collective advocacy on financing justice — debt relief, tax justice, and innovative financing that reaches communities. INFID's C20 Chairmanship is the most concrete example of Southern civil society engaging financing justice at the highest level. The Forus LAC network connecting ASONOG (Honduras), CONGCOOP (Guatemala), and ABONG (Brazil) demonstrates that cross-border civil society coordination on financing justice can operate horizontally across regions.

On civic space: According to CIVICUS Monitor's 2025 global findings, only 7% of the world's population lives in countries with free or relatively open civic space (CIVICUS Monitor, 202580). The 20 cases make this concrete: SPONG (Burkina Faso) under military governance since January 2022; FONGDD (Guinea) under transition since 2021; CNONGD (DRC) with documented CSO space constraints. South-South solidarity on civic space means Forus members in more open contexts advocating for peers in restricted contexts — Forus former Chair Christelle Kalhoulé of SPONG using her global visibility as a protection mechanism; INFID's G20 position amplifying Sahel civil society's voice; LAPAS's EU connections raising Eastern European civic space concerns.

# Cost-Effectiveness of Civil Society SSTC: The Investment Case

The cost comparison across modalities is stark. Available cost comparisons suggest that structured peer learning exchanges can deliver similar or greater knowledge transfer value at a fraction of the cost of traditional Northern technical assistance engagements. For funders considering how to allocate development cooperation resources in the final years of the 2030 Agenda, resourcing civil society-facilitated peer learning is likely to represent high value for money — though more systematic cost-effectiveness evidence would strengthen this claim simultaneously rather than one programme country sequentially.

| Approach | Average Timeline | Resource Implications | Civil Society Role |
|---|---|---|---|
| Independent local innovation | 2–3 years trial-and-error | High opportunity cost due to limited knowledge-sharing | Lead actor, but rarely shared beyond one platform |
| Traditional technical assistance | 3–5 years | Resource-intensive; high reliance on external expertise | Often absent or sub-contracted at implementation only |
| Government-to-government SSC | 1–3 years | Variable; often poorly documented | Absent from formal SSTC governance in reviewed cases |
| Civil society regional network (PIANGO model) | Ongoing, sustained | Lower per-country cost through shared learning and coordination | Regional coordination hub — SSTC for 15 countries simultaneously |



Forus members and civil society networks are both subjects of this report's analysis and actors in the advocacy it calls for. The evidence documented here — of peer learning that goes uncounted, of governance gaps that remain unchallenged, of regional networks that function without adequate resourcing — must be named, documented and leveraged across across national, regional and global advocacy spaces. The task for Forus members is to make civil society-led SSTC visible: to map it, document it, and advocate for its recognition and resourcing in all forums where development cooperation is discussed.

Chapter 6

# Recommendations and Action Agenda

The evidence presented in this report points to one central conclusion: civil society participation is not an accessory to South-South and triangular cooperation. It is a condition for cooperation that is more locally grounded, accountable, adaptive, legitimate and sustainable.

The recommendations in this chapter are organised according to the actors with the greatest capacity to influence how SSTC is designed, financed, monitored, reported and recognised. These actors do not hold the same levers of change. National governments and SSTC lead institutions shape national strategies, bilateral agreements and programme governance. UNOSSC, UNDP and the wider UN development system influence what is recognised, documented and reported as SSTC. Triangular cooperation providers and facilitators shape programme design and financing conditions. Regional intergovernmental organisations create political and peer-learning spaces across countries. Public development banks and development finance institutions influence technical cooperation, project preparation, safeguards and investment standards. Global policy processes shape the future norms of development cooperation. Forus members and civil society networks are the advocacy actors who can use this evidence to push for change.

The central message is the same across all audiences: civil society participation is not only a democratic principle. It is a practical way to improve cooperation quality. Civil society brings community evidence, identifies exclusion risks, helps adapt cooperation models to context, strengthens accountability, builds public trust and supports the long-term sustainability of results.



## For national governments and SSTC lead institutions

### Core ask: Institutionalise civil society participation in SSTC governance, design, monitoring and reporting.

National governments are the primary architects of South-South cooperation. They negotiate agreements, define priorities, create national cooperation strategies, coordinate with partner countries and decide how cooperation is reported. For this reason, ministries of foreign affairs, planning and finance, national cooperation agencies, SDG coordination bodies and SSTC focal points are among the most important audiences for this report.

Civil society should not be treated as an external commentator or an implementing partner brought in after decisions have already been made. National civil society platforms, community-based organisations, thematic coalitions, women's rights organisations, youth groups, organisations of persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples' organisations, local development actors and other civic actors should be involved before cooperation priorities, partners, models and implementation arrangements are finalised.

This would make SSTC more effective because governments benefit from the knowledge civil society holds. Civil society can identify which communities are being missed, where implementation risks are emerging, which assumptions do not fit local realities, and how cooperation can be adapted to build ownership and trust. Civil society participation can also help governments strengthen the legitimacy of SSTC at a time when public trust in institutions is under pressure.

**National governments and SSTC lead institutions should:**

1. Establish regular government-civil society dialogue mechanisms on SSTC, connected to existing national cooperation, SDG, planning or development effectiveness structures where possible.
2. Include civil society in the design of SSTC policies, programmes and bilateral cooperation agreements before priorities, partners and programme models are finalised.
3. Ensure that national civil society platforms and relevant thematic coalitions participate in monitoring and review mechanisms for SSTC programmes and national SSTC strategies.
4. Publish accessible information on SSTC agreements, objectives, priorities, financing, implementation partners, timelines, expected results and evaluations.
5. Recognise civil society-generated evidence, citizen data and civil society-facilitated peer learning in VNRs, VLRs, national SDG reports and development cooperation reporting.
6. Include community feedback mechanisms in SSTC programmes, especially those affecting land, livelihoods, public services, climate adaptation, infrastructure, digital transformation, food systems or marginalised communities.
7. Use national NGO platforms and civil society coordination bodies as entry points for structured dialogue, evidence gathering, community consultation and accountability.
8. Ensure participation of groups often excluded from cooperation design, including women, youth, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, migrants, displaced communities, rural communities and other groups facing marginalisation.
9. Protect civil society participation in contexts of restricted civic space, political transition or crisis, where independent monitoring and community voice may be most needed.
10. Avoid presenting SSTC as automatically inclusive or horizontal unless its governance includes transparency, participation and accountability to communities.

## For UNOSSC, UNDP and the wider UN development system

### Core ask: Recognise civil society-led peer learning, citizen-generated evidence and community monitoring as part of the SSTC ecosystem.

The UN system plays a central role in shaping the global understanding of South-South and triangular cooperation. UNOSSC influences global narratives, knowledge platforms and visibility. UNDP supports many SSTC and triangular cooperation initiatives at country and regional levels. UN Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams can help connect national civil society platforms to government-led cooperation, SDG implementation and VNR processes. UN DESA and HLPF-related spaces influence how SSTC is reflected in SDG follow-up and review.

This means the UN system can help correct one of the main gaps identified in this report: much of the SSTC facilitated by civil society is happening, but it is not counted, reported, financed or recognised. Civil society platforms are already exchanging methods on SDG monitoring, localisation, public finance accountability, climate adaptation, disaster resilience, civic space protection and community participation. Yet these exchanges often remain invisible in official SSTC systems.

**UNOSSC, UNDP and the wider UN development system should:**

1. Recognise civil society-led peer learning, citizen-generated evidence and community monitoring as valid contributions to SSTC.
2. Update SSTC guidance, knowledge platforms and documentation practices to include civil society-facilitated peer exchange and community-based evidence.
3. Encourage countries to report civil society contributions to SSTC in VNRs, VLRs, national SDG reports and UN-supported cooperation reviews.
4. Ensure that UN-supported SSTC and triangular cooperation programmes include civil society participation in design, implementation, monitoring, review and learning.
5. Support UN Country Teams to connect national civil society platforms with government SSTC focal points, SDG coordination bodies and relevant line ministries.
6. Create or promote flexible funding windows for civil society-led and multi-stakeholder SSTC, particularly in LDCs, SIDS, fragile contexts and countries facing restrictions on civic space.
7. Support regional civil society networks as SSTC infrastructure, recognising that they help knowledge move across countries facing comparable development challenges.
8. Work with civil society networks to develop simple methodologies for documenting civil society-led SSTC, including who exchanged what, how learning was adapted, what changed, and what resources were required.
9. Ensure that UN-supported SSTC initiatives include transparency and accountability standards, especially where programmes affect marginalised communities, public services, climate resilience, land, livelihoods or local governance.
10. Recognise civil society as one of the important development pillars in SSTC programming, that generates evidence, advances peer learnings and strengthens monitoring and accountability, rather than treating it solely as a beneficiary or implementing partner considering civil society's diverse roles in generating SSTC evidence, enabling peer learning, and strengthening monitoring and accountability.

## For triangular cooperation providers and facilitators

### Core ask: Make civil society participation a funded design requirement in triangular cooperation.

Triangular cooperation can play an important role in connecting Southern expertise, additional resources, technical support and convening power. It can help countries and communities learn from peers while also mobilising financing or institutional support from a third partner. However, triangular cooperation does not automatically avoid the weaknesses of traditional aid. If priorities are defined without affected communities, if civil society is consulted too late, or if accountability is dispersed across several institutions, triangular cooperation can reproduce top-down models under a different label.

**Triangular cooperation providers and facilitators should:**

1. Make meaningful civil society participation a requirement in triangular cooperation programme design, not an optional add-on.
2. Include civil society from the earliest design stage, before priorities, cooperation models, target communities and implementation arrangements are finalised.
3. Budget for civil society participation from the outset, including costs for convening, translation, interpretation, facilitation, community consultation, documentation, travel, accessibility and follow-up.
4. Require triangular cooperation proposals to explain how civil society evidence, local knowledge and community feedback shaped programme design.
5. Include civil society actors in risk assessment, safeguards, monitoring, evaluation and learning processes.
6. Ensure that affected communities have access to information, feedback channels and accountability mechanisms throughout the programme cycle.
7. Fund civil society-led peer learning exchanges, including mentorship, study visits, communities of practice, digital exchanges and joint documentation.
8. Support regional and global civil society networks as cooperation infrastructure, especially where they connect multiple countries facing similar challenges.
9. Avoid treating civil society only as an implementing contractor. Where civil society brings evidence, legitimacy, monitoring capacity or peer-learning infrastructure, it should be recognised as a design and accountability partner.
10. Use triangular cooperation to model higher standards of transparency, participation and accountability than those often found in purely bilateral cooperation.

## For regional intergovernmental organisations

### Core ask: Open regional SSTC, SDG and peer-learning mechanisms to structured civil society participation.

Regional intergovernmental organisations's primary role is political, normative and convening. They shape regional cooperation agendas, facilitate peer learning between governments, coordinate regional strategies and create spaces where countries exchange policy experience. This makes them important actors for strengthening civil society participation in SSTC.

This recommendation is addressed to regional and subregional bodies that coordinate cooperation, SDG implementation, technical exchange, policy learning or regional public goods. Depending on the region, this may include the African Union and AUDA-NEPAD, ECOWAS, SADC, EAC, ASEAN, the Pacific Islands Forum, PIFCSS, CELAC, SICA, CARICOM, SAARC and other relevant regional mechanisms, as well as regional SDG forums and UN regional commission spaces where appropriate.

**Regional intergovernmental organisations should:**

1. Establish structured civil society participation mechanisms in regional SSTC, SDG implementation and policy-learning processes.
2. Involve national and regional civil society platforms in agenda-setting, evidence generation, monitoring and review of regional cooperation initiatives.
3. Ensure that regional peer-learning spaces are not limited to government officials, but also include civil society actors with community-level evidence and implementation experience.
4. Create regular spaces for exchange between governments, civil society, local authorities, parliaments, UN actors and regional institutions on SSTC and SDG implementation.
5. Recognise civil society-led regional peer learning as part of the regional SSTC ecosystem.
6. Support regional civil society networks that connect national platforms across countries and help adapt practices to comparable political, social and institutional contexts.
7. Include civil society in regional monitoring of cooperation commitments, especially those related to SDG localisation, public finance, civic space, climate adaptation, gender equality, social protection and inclusive governance.
8. Protect civil society participation in regional spaces, especially for actors from countries facing political transition, conflict or restrictions on civic space.
9. Promote regional transparency standards for SSTC, including public information on cooperation priorities, partners, financing, implementation and results.
10. Avoid creating parallel consultation spaces that have no influence on decision-making. Civil society participation should be connected to actual regional cooperation processes.

## For public development banks and development finance institutions

### Core ask: Apply transparency, safeguard and participation standards to SSTC-linked technical cooperation and investment.

Public development banks and development finance institutions' influence lies in financing, project preparation, technical assistance, safeguards, accountability mechanisms, public policy support and investment standards. They shape how cooperation is translated into infrastructure, climate finance, public services, food systems, digital transformation, regional public goods and other investment areas that directly affect communities.

This recommendation applies to multilateral, regional, subregional and national public development banks and development finance institutions involved in SSTC-linked technical cooperation, policy support, investment, project preparation or blended finance.

**Public development banks and development finance institutions should:**

1. Require meaningful civil society participation in SSTC-linked technical cooperation, project preparation and investment programmes.
2. Publish accessible information on SSTC-linked projects and technical cooperation, including objectives, financing, partners, implementation timelines, expected impacts and evaluation findings.
3. Ensure that affected communities and CSOs have access to information, consultation processes and accountability mechanisms.
4. Apply rights-based, gender-responsive, climate-sensitive and community accountability standards to SSTC-linked investments.
5. Include civil society in needs assessments, social and environmental risk analysis, safeguards, monitoring and learning processes.
6. Ensure that civil society participation is budgeted as part of project preparation and implementation, rather than left to unfunded consultations.
7. Support community monitoring of SSTC-linked investments, especially in infrastructure, climate adaptation, energy, agriculture, digital transformation and public services.
8. Use technical cooperation and policy support to strengthen participatory public finance, budget transparency and local accountability.
9. Support regional civil society networks and national platforms that can bring community evidence into investment design and monitoring.
10. Align SSTC-linked finance with civic space, transparency, accountability and locally-led development principles.

## For global development cooperation policy processes

### Core ask: Embed civil society participation, civic space, transparency and accountability in the future cooperation agenda.

This set of recommendations is addressed to the set of actors shaping the future of development cooperation through SDG review, FfD follow-up, development effectiveness discussions, UNOSSC/BAPA+ follow-up, OECD-DAC triangular cooperation discussions and future post-2030 debates. This includes UN Member States, UN entities, development cooperation forums, civil society coalitions, OECD-DAC and GPEDC-related spaces where relevant, FfD follow-up actors, HLPF and SDG review processes, and platforms shaping future cooperation norms.

The future of development cooperation should learn from the best principles of South-South cooperation: horizontality, solidarity, mutual learning, shared experience and respect for national ownership. But it must not romanticise SSTC. South-South and triangular cooperation can also reproduce exclusion, opacity, geopolitical competition and top-down decision-making when participation and accountability are weak.

**Global development cooperation policy processes should:**

1. Recognise civil society participation as a condition for effective, accountable and sustainable cooperation.
2. Embed civic space, transparency, rights-based accountability and multi-stakeholder governance as core principles of future development cooperation frameworks.
3. Ensure that future SDG, FfD and development effectiveness monitoring frameworks recognise civil society-led peer learning and community-generated evidence.
4. Include civil society participation requirements in future cooperation review systems, including national, regional and global reporting.
5. Support civil society shadow reporting on cooperation quality, community impact, exclusion risks and accountability gaps.
6. Recognise civil society-led SSTC as a real cooperation practice, including regional learning networks, national platform exchanges, peer mentoring and community-to-community learning.
7. Avoid designing future cooperation frameworks around state-to-state reporting alone. If future cooperation is to be locally grounded, monitoring systems must include community evidence and civil society perspectives.
8. Ensure that future development cooperation frameworks address civic space as an enabling condition for effective cooperation.
9. Promote transparency standards across all cooperation modalities, including South-South, triangular, North-South, blended and development finance cooperation.
10. Ensure that financing mechanisms for future cooperation include accessible funding for local, national and regional civil society platforms.

## For Forus Members and wider civil society networks

### Core ask: Document, name and advocate for civil society-led SSTC.

Many Forus members and wider civil society networks are already contributing to SSTC without naming it as such. They exchange methods on SDG monitoring, VNR engagement, public finance accountability, localisation, climate adaptation, civic space protection, community participation and provider-country advocacy. They connect peers across countries and regions. They help adapt practice from one context to another. They produce evidence that can improve cooperation quality. The next step is to document this work more systematically and use it for advocacy.

**Forus members and wider civil society networks should:**

1. Map national SSTC institutions, cooperation agencies, SDG coordination bodies, regional mechanisms, public development banks, UN Country Team entry points and relevant parliamentary or policy spaces.
2. Document civil society-led SSTC using a simple template: what challenge was addressed; who exchanged with whom; what knowledge or practice was shared; how it was adapted; what changed; what resources were required; and what policy lesson emerged.
3. Identify the strongest cases from each region and turn them into short policy stories for advocacy, communications and engagement with governments, UN actors and funders.
4. Use VNRs, VLRs, HLPF, regional SDG forums, UNOSSC spaces, FfD follow-up, Finance in Common, OECD-DAC consultations, GPEDC/development effectiveness spaces and regional cooperation forums to advocate for civil society inclusion in SSTC.
5. Advocate with national governments for structured participation in SSTC strategies, programme design, monitoring and reporting.
6. Build peer mentoring across the Forus network around areas where members already hold strong practice, including inclusive data, SDG monitoring, VNR engagement, public finance accountability, civic space protection, climate adaptation, localisation and provider-country advocacy.
7. Develop regional advocacy asks on SSTC that can be adapted by national platforms and regional coalitions.
8. Advocate for dedicated financing for civil society-led SSTC, including regional exchanges, translation, facilitation, digital platforms, community monitoring, documentation and communications.
9. Strengthen collaboration between civil society actors in provider, recipient and facilitator countries so that SSTC can be monitored from multiple sides.
10. Use and share report findings to demonstrate civil society's role as an important SSTC actor in improving the effectiveness and quality of development cooperation. Inclusion of civil society in SSTC is not an option but a necessity for effective, inclusive and accountable cooperation.




Civil society participation is not only a democratic principle. It is a practical way to improve cooperation quality.

What's next

# Conclusion

South-South and triangular cooperation matter because the world needs faster, more grounded and more legitimate ways to advance sustainable development. South-South and triangular cooperation can help reshape development cooperation for a more multipolar and interconnected world. But this promise will not be realised through state-to-state cooperation alone. If SSTC is to be more than a change in who provides cooperation, it must also change how cooperation is governed, whose knowledge counts, and who has the power to shape priorities.

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The evidence reviewed in this report shows that civil society already performs essential SSTC functions. Civil society already plays this role in practice. It connects local realities to national policy. It helps knowledge travel across contexts. It monitors whether cooperation reaches communities. It raises early warnings when programmes create harm. It builds trust, adapts practice and sustains learning beyond project cycles.

The central challenge is institutional. Civil society is active in practice but too often invisible in governance, financing and reporting. This weakens cooperation and wastes knowledge that could help accelerate implementation. The solution is not to add civil society as an afterthought, but to design cooperation systems that recognise its role from the outset.



The report therefore calls for a shift in how civil society is understood within SSTC. Civil society should not be treated only as a beneficiary, a consulted stakeholder or an implementing contractor. It should be recognised as part of the cooperation infrastructure that makes learning, adaptation and accountability possible.

Across all audiences, five priority asks emerge.

1

**First, civil society should be involved at the designing stage of SSTC programs and development cooperation initiatives.** Early involvement enables civil society to shape priorities, identify risks and adapt models to local realities before key decisions are locked in.

2

**Second, civil society-led peer learning should be recognised as SSTC.** When national platforms, regional coalitions and community organisations exchange methods across countries, they are already practising South-South cooperation. The problem is that official systems often fail to count or finance this work.

3

**Third, SSTC should include transparency and accountability standards.** Cooperation cannot be accountable if communities do not know what has been agreed, who is financing it, who is implementing it, what results are expected and how concerns can be raised.

4

**Fourth, triangular cooperation should finance participation as part of programme design.** If civil society participation is not budgeted, it is likely to remain tokenistic, extractive or dependent on voluntary labour.

5

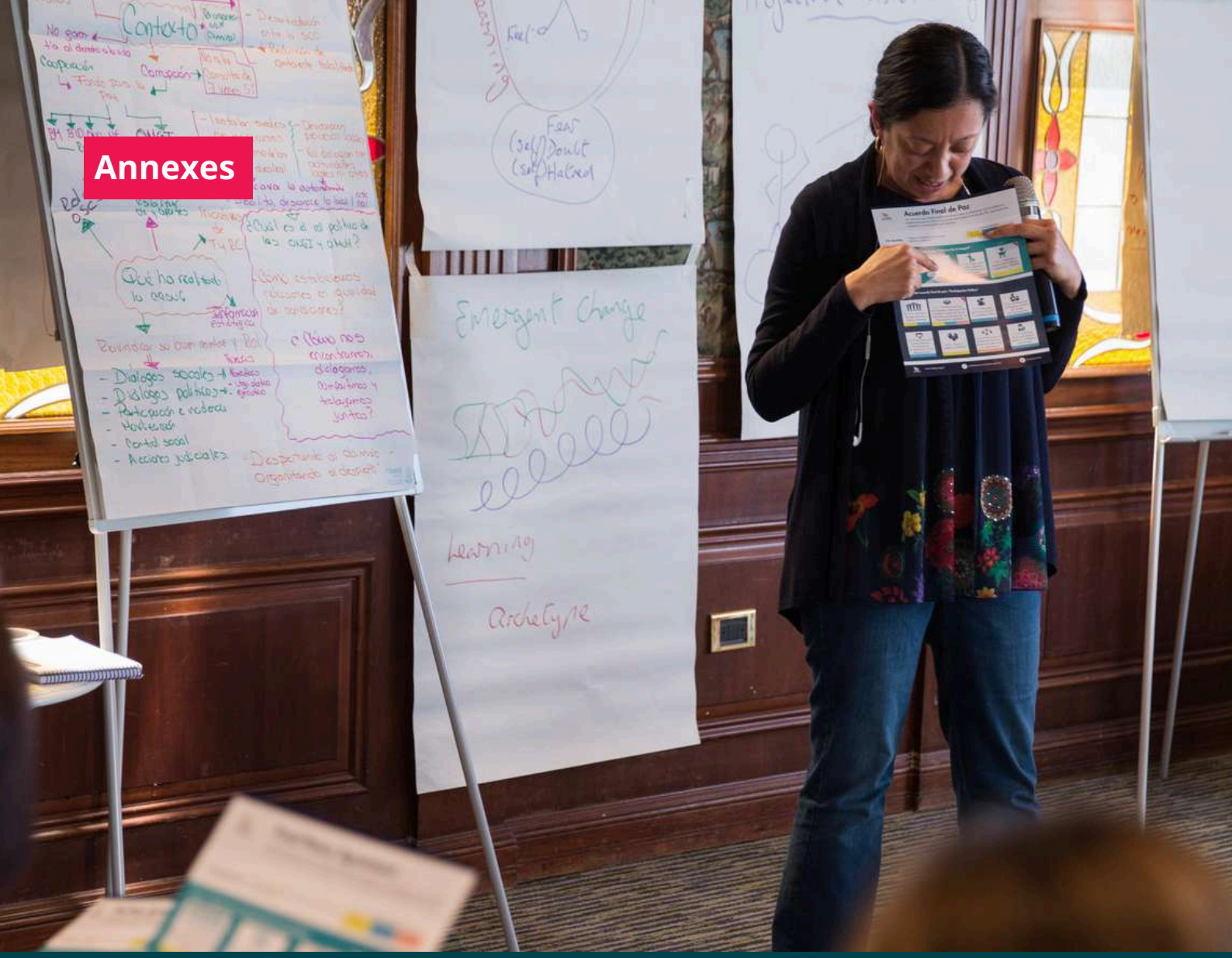
**Fifth, civic space should be treated as an enabling condition for effective cooperation.** In contexts where civil society is restricted, state-to-state cooperation may continue while community oversight weakens. SSTC governance needs safeguards to protect participation precisely where it is most needed.

This is not only a civil society agenda. It is an effectiveness agenda. SSTC will be stronger when it is shaped with the people and organisations closest to implementation and lived realities. The task now is to make civil society's role visible, resourced and institutionalised. That is how South-South and triangular cooperation can become more effective, more accountable, more locally grounded and more sustainable.

As governments, UN actors, funders and civil society begin shaping the final years of Agenda 2030 and the future post-2030 framework, one lesson should be clear: cooperation must be more horizontal, more locally anchored and more accountable to people. Civil society is not peripheral to that shift. It is one of the main connectors that makes development cooperation possible.



# Annexes




**This companion document** presents the full case evidence base for the Forus report South-South and Triangular Cooperation: Civil Society as Connectors. All cases are drawn from the Forus membership — national NGO platforms and regional coalitions across Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia-Pacific, and Europe. Each case follows a common structure: Context / What Happened / Why This Matters for SSTC / Key Lesson / References.

These cases are used throughout the main report as evidence to answer four questions: what makes SSTC effective; what civil society contributes; where civil society is still excluded from SSTC governance; and what needs to change. This companion document provides the full detail behind the shorter references and case boxes in the main report.

The test applied to each case: does it show a concrete civil society contribution to SSTC quality — through evidence, peer learning, accountability, adaptation or governance — and can it be sourced? Cases where evidence remains incomplete or unverified are marked with an editorial note.

**Discover the Case Studies Companion Document**

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