GP Policy Paper

The Role and Impact of Civil Society in Supporting Sustainable Development and Tackling Humanitarian Challenges

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THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN TACKLING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES

In 2018 there are 7.5 billion people on the earth.[1] More than 700 million of these people are living in abject poverty, under USD 1.90 a day[2], 1 billion people are living in slums and informal settlements[3], and 69 million are forcibly displaced, due to conflict or natural disasters. Of those displaced over 25 million are refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18.[4] Improving these children's life chances, eradicating poverty and inequality, tackling climate change, stemming the tide of natural disasters, and preventing conflict and instability are immense challenges.

World leaders have taken steps in the right direction by agreeing to a set of 17 ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which cover many of above-mentioned issues. But governments cannot do this alone. The root causes of these issues are complex, requiring technical solutions as well as broad community mobilization. To which end, there is a crucial role for civil society, as recognized in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which calls for a new Global Partnership "bringing together Governments, the private sector, civil society..." and other relevant actors.[5]

"It is people mobilized as you are, more than any government initiative or scientific breakthrough, who can overcome the obstacles to a better world. From global campaigns to community organizing; from peaceful protest to the provision of lifesaving services; from day-to-day projects to humanitarian emergencies, the civil society movement continues to grow and make its mark."
Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations

Civil society is also increasingly important in cases of abdicated state responsibility or for transboundary issues. A significant amount of non-governmental actors actively pursue cross-border collaboration and promote innovative and effective solutions regarding global challenges, such as providing support for international refugees, or encouraging post-conflict community dialogue across borders, in areas such as Mano River in West Africa.[6]

However, it is important to note that civil society is highly heterogenous. At its most basic, civil society refers to "a community of citizens linked by common interests and collective activity."[7] These communities take on many forms but are often institutionalized as social movements, advocacy groups, faith-based groups, charities, charitable foundations, and academic institutions. Over the last two decades, civil society has evolved significantly. Technology, geopolitics, increasing climatic shocks and humanitarian crises have created opportunities and pressures, spurring the creation of millions of civil society organizations around the world, "giving rise to exciting models for citizen expression both online and offline, and generating increasing involvement in global governance processes."[8]

According to the Yearbook of International Organizations, the number of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) was reported to have increased from 6,000 in 1990 to more than 50,000 in 2006, and now to over 65,000. Civil society groups are also growing within countries; in 2009, it was estimated that India has around 3.3 million NGOs.[9]

In spite of the heterogeneity of CSOs, there are a range of common functions through which civil society support governments and citizens to improve social, economic and environmental outcomes:
1. First, civil society plays a crucial role as a check and balance upon government and private institutions, as advocates for change and agents of accountability.
2. Civil society groups, particularly academia, play a crucial role collecting data and curating specialist knowledge, which can be used by government to support evidence-based policy and planning.
3. Civil society, particularly charities, plays an essential role providing interim services where governments are unable or unwilling to act. This function is particularly important in emergencies and humanitarian situations.
4. Thanks to their strong local and grassroots connections, civil society can play a crucial role in communicating development priorities to local communities and ensuring that their voices, including especially marginalized and vulnerable populations, are taken into account in local and national policy and decision-making.
5. Finally, civil society, particularly foundations and charities, plays a crucial role raising additional resources to support sustainable development endeavors, including urgent life-saving services in emergencies.

Civil societies' ability to perform these functions is critical to achieving sustainable development, and yet there is very little evidence on the performance of such groups, of their resources and sustainability, or of their ultimate impact. This is a challenge that the international community has been struggling with for many years, as highlighted at the 2011 Busan High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness[10]. But with increasing environmental and climactic stresses, and a global commitment to sustainable development, it is urgent that we assess their performance and contribution towards sustainable development. Only then, donors and public financiers can gain a better idea of how to fund and support civil society organizations to ensure maximum impact.

THE FORM AND FUNCTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY
CSOs serve a range of very diverse functions. They may act as watchdogs, holding governments and other public and private actors to account, for example international NGO Transparency International (TI). TI claims that developing countries lose as much as USD 1.26 trillion per annum to corruption, bribery, theft and tax evasion.[11] Their role is to shine a spotlight on instances of corruption and to empower local community groups to track and monitor government expenditures to hold them to account and to ensure that allocated resources reach the appropriate beneficiaries.

Another common function of CSOs is to strengthen the voice and agency of the disempowered and political marginalized. For example, during the negotiations on the Post-2015 Agenda (which eventually became Agenda 2030) CSOs consulted marginalized and hard to reach people, such as smallholder farmers and agricultural community groups in Monrovia, Liberia to provide input to an official communique for the Panel.[12] By doing so, they included voices and concerns which otherwise would not have entered the negotiation process.

In the context of humanitarian crises, CSOs often play a vital, lifesaving role as first responders, providing emergency services and relief to those most affected. For example, Save the Children claims to have provided essential services and psychosocial support to more than 1.7 million of the 5.3 million children affected by the war in Syria.[13]

The diversity of these functions shows the necessity to take a more nuanced approach to categorizing, engaging with, and supporting CSOs. In the introduction five broad categories of functions were identified: acting as a watchdog, curating specialist knowledge, providing interim services, connecting to local communities, and fundraising. A more nuanced breakdown of core CSO functions is provided by the World Economic Forum (in Table 2).[14]

Table 1: Ten Functions of Civil Society Organizations

Watchdog	Holding institutions to account, promoting transparency and accountability.
Advocate	Raising awareness of societal issues and challenges and advocating for change.
Service provider	Delivering services to meet societal needs such as education, health, food and security: implementing disaster management preparedness and emergency response.
Expert	Bringing unique knowledge and experience to shape policy and strategy, and identifying and building solutions.
Capacity builder	Providing education, training and other capacity building.
Incubator	Development solutions that may require a long gestation of play-back period.
Representative	Giving power to the voice of the marginalized or underrepresented.
Citizenship champion	Encouraging citizen engagement and supporting the rights of citizens.
Solidarity supporter	Promoting fundamental and universal values.
Definer of standards	Creating norms that shape market and state activity.

Source: World Economic Forum (2013)

Apart from their functions, CSOs share common attributes which give them particular value of being independent of government or strong private sector interests (for the most part). Furthermore, they have structures that allow a quick response to crises or local concerns by having strong grassroot connections, budgets with few ties or spending conditions, and a strong public voice to apply pressure. However, these comparative advantages are not ubiquitous. They apply to different types of civil society organisations, according to their governance arrangements and organisational structures. Table 1 provides an overview of the different types of civil society institutions and their comparative strengths.

Table 2: Strengths of Different Civil Society Organisations

Type of Civil Society Organisation	Independent	Ability to act quickly	Local / Grassroots connections	Technical skills / specialisation	Compilers of data	Strong public voice / platform	Well resourced
Social Movement	●	●	●				
Charity (including advocacy groups)	●	●	●			●	●
Foundation						●	●
Academic institution	●			●	●	●	

Source: Author's own

In spite of their varied strengths, the heterogeneity of CSOs can also be a weakness. The lack of definition means some organisations use these civic, non-governmental platforms for (hidden) political or private agendas, to undercut democratic processes or to exert religious influence. Their heterogeneity also makes it very hard for governments or the international community to monitor them.

There are extremely mixed levels of professionalism, transparency and accountability to the constituents they claim to represent.[15] In the past decade there have been some efforts to counter this, for example through the Busan CSO Effectiveness Agenda[16], however, these have had limited success so far. Meanwhile various national government efforts to regulate CSOs have been criticised for limiting space for civic mobilization.[17] This is a legitimate concern as the enabling environment for civil society has been closing in recent years and activists in many countries face violence and harassments. According to the CIVICUS Monitor report, as of November 2018, basic freedoms of assembly and association were "under attack" in 111 out of the 196 countries assessed, meaning that just 4% of the world's population are living in countries were governments respect full freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression.[18]

THE IMPACT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Quantifying the Impact of Civil Society

Given the challenges in regulating CSOs, it can be very hard to critically evaluate their impact upon humanitarian or development challenges.[19] However, taking an instrumental, quantitative approach and looking at the sheer scale of private resources they have mobilized, the data they have compiled, and the financial effects of their accountability efforts can help us understanding their contribution. Furthermore, in some instances, where data is a core part of an intervention, it is also possible to discern the health and wellbeing outcomes resulting from CSOs service provision.

Fundraising

The most instrumental way to measure the contribution of civil society groups is their mobilisation of funding in support of humanitarian and sustainable development objectives. International NGOs and foundations are critical for mobilizing resources, particularly from private philanthropy and individual giving. Development Initiatives (DI) estimate that in 2017 alone USD 6.5 billion (or 31%) of humanitarian funding was raised from private funding (by CSO groups and private entities), whilst USD 20.7 billion came from governments and EU institutions.[20]

CSOs also play a crucial role mobilizing governments' and the private sector's support for long-term development programs and interventions. For example, as an active, equal member of the Global Fund for Aids, TB and Malaria (represented on 3 of 20 Board Seats) CSOs have helped raise over USD 4 billion towards health programs focused on reducing the number of deaths related to AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria in countries like Uganda, Ghana, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and India.[21]

Monitoring and Data Collection

CSOs can play both formal and informal monitoring roles within international development.[22] Their contributions are formal when there is a direct commitment by the entity to perform a designated function, for example academia being appointed by a government or CSO to undertake baseline monitoring of a given project or program. Alternatively, and more commonly[23], CSOs perform informal monitoring functions, observing the consequences of other parties' actions. Table 3 summarises CSOs' formal and informal monitoring roles related to the Global Fund for Aids TB and Malaria (GFATM) and the Global AIDS Response Progress Reporting (GARPR) initiative. It highlights the wide range of activities CSOs perform and the utility of them working both alongside governments and multilateral organizations, as well as outside of these organizations to produce informal shadow reports and other accountability tools.

A celebrated example of the significant contribution of CSOs to formal monitoring is The University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation which works with the WHO to produce the annual Global Burden of Disease report (GBD), the most comprehensive global assessment of diseases, injuries and risk factors around the world. As of 2017, the GBD tracked 359 causes of death and disability across 195 countries.

With this information, IHME compiles disability-adjusted life-year (DALY) metrics – as a single measure to quantify the burden of diseases, injuries and risk factors by age, sex and region, which is used by the WHO, other UN institutions and countries to track disease prevalence and design resultant policies.[24] Thanks to these data it is now possible for countries to calculate the benefit – cost ratios for certain disease interventions.

Table 3: CSO Participation in Monitoring Functions related to GARPR and GFATM

	Formal	Informal
GARPR	• Members of national teams responsible for compiling submissions to GARPR • Members of National AIDS Commission / Councils or multi-stakeholder bodies overseeing submissions • Contributions of strategic information, including Data • Members of evaluation teams	• Production of shadow reports • Participation in setting and reviewing global targets
GFATM	• Representatives on delegations and committees • Voting members of governance boards • Participants in Partnership Forums	• CSO publications • Global and local watchdogs • Informal review of organizational policies and frameworks

Source: Adapted from Smith et al., (2017)[25]

For example, Bertram et al., (2018) used the GBD data to examine the return on investment for a limited set of Non-Communicable Disease prevention interventions in 20 countries. They estimated that if USD 120 billion were invested in these countries between 2015 and 2030 (an additional USD 1.50 per capita per year) the countries could avert 15 million deaths, 8 million incidents of ischemic heart disease, and 13 million incidents of stroke.[26] Thereby making a compelling case for investing in preventative health interventions, as well as compiling strong underlying data.

Accountability
Closely related to their informal monitoring function is the notion of CSOs being watchdogs, who hold different stakeholders accountable for their commitments. When monitoring governments, CSO activities generally relate to monitoring policy commitments, program effectiveness, and spending.

There are countless media reports and anecdotal references to the impact of CSOs upon government accountability and transparency, but in spite of this, very few examples have been well documented, including in published academic literature.

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One exception is the case of the Nigerian civic startup BudgIT. BudgIT launched in 2011 to take on the challenge of frivolous government spending and opaque budgetary processes. The organization aims to make budgetary data from Nigeria's Federal Government more accessible and understandable through digital technologies, including making PDFs machine-readable and designing visual representations of the data for those with low data literacy. Their campaign to drive awareness and analysis of the 2017 federal budget successfully reached 2.5 million Nigerians via online and offline platforms and engaged 25,000 citizens in the review process. This led to action on unnecessary budgetary items and "fake" projects. In one example, BudgIT exposed a 41 million Naira (USD 113,575) investment that claimed to be funding a non-existent youth center in Kebbi State. By encouraging careful public review of the budget, BudgIT mobilized civil outcry on public pay levels, resulting in a public servant salary cap. BudgIT's successes demonstrate how civil society groups can help to build trust in public institutions and improve efficiency by campaigning for data openness, accessibility, and data literacy.[27]

Service Provision
In countries or regions where the government is weak or unwilling, CSOs often operate comprehensive health, education or other social support programs, such as the multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis program in Somalia, supported by the GFATM. Elsewhere, CSOs run outreach programs targeting marginalized populations that might be difficult or impossible for government institutions to undertake. It is almost impossible to quantify the impact of all of these programs taken together, but focusing on just one CSO-led intervention suggests these have a profound impact upon people's wellbeing and life chances. For example, nearly one billion people worldwide live in slums – unplanned communities that are overcrowded, highly impoverished, and hazardous to their residents. These people are at high risk of being left behind not only in official statistics, but also in receiving essential services like healthcare. International nonprofit BRAC developed a data-driven approach to account and care for mothers and young children in these communities through the healthcare initiative Manoshi. Manoshi built the capacity of local health workers in Bangladesh to derive actionable data from social mapping, local censuses, and realtime data-sharing via mobile technology, contributing to more timely and effective maternal health interventions in urban slums. Following the introduction of the Manoshi project, maternal mortality fell by 56 percent and infant mortality fell by 60 percent in project areas. BRAC estimates that from 2008 to 2017, 1,087 maternal deaths were averted out of the 2,476 deaths that would have been expected based on national statistics. This project underscores the lifesaving role that CSOs can play, as well as the innovation they can drive by trialing new, often data-based approaches which make vulnerable people visible in national data.[28]

Qualitative Evidence on CSO's Impact and Contribution
Perhaps equally, if not more, compelling than quantitative evidence of impact is qualitative and case study evidence, which also serves to highlight CSOs less explicit support functions.

Advocacy

CSOs play a profound role campaigning and advocating for change. Nevertheless, it is incredibly hard to attribute any resultant policy or budgetary changes to their role alone, given other domestic and international pressures. Case studies can help to illuminate the powerful influence that CSOs can have upon local and national governments and the international community. For example, it is thanks to the efforts of more than 500 CSOs (including community groups, civil associations, charities and academia institutions), working with mayors and city networks from around the world, that Agenda 2030 includes an explicit SDG focused on Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements (SDG 11). The UrbanSDG Campaign played a pivotal role in recommending targets and indicators to member states and explaining the importance of a place-based approach to development, as well as highlighting the vulnerability of urban residents living in slums and increasingly congested cities. As noted by the UN Secretary General "the battle for sustainable development will be won or lost in cities" and yet, in the first iterations of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons' and in the initial drafts of the Open Working Group's SDGs a cities goal was absent. It was only after urban scientists had presented to the Open Working Group, and after the UrbanSDG Campaign had hosted numerous events and submitted various position papers, that reticent Member States, such as the UK, changed their position.[29]

Catalysing Partnerships and Incubating Solutions

CSOs play a crucial role brokering partnerships and incubating new solutions in support of sustainable development challenges. A good example of this is provided by a recent project, supported by the Sustainable Development Solution Network's data program, TReNDS, focused on data reconciliation.[30] According to Colombia's National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), official data is only available for 54% of the global SDG indicators.[31] But the chambers of commerce in all of Colombia's cities hold information that could be useful to measure many of these missing dimensions, such as the number of commercial bank branches (8.10), manufacturing employment as a proportion of total employment (9.2). As such, local think-tank and NGO, CEPEI, brought together DANE and the Bogotá Chamber of Commerce (a sub-national agency and private entity) to share data which could support local and national efforts to monitor and achieve sustainable development. According to Philipp Schönrock, Director of CEPEI, it was a process of "co-creation... to build a stronger ecosystem for SDG data."[32] This process encouraged DANE to change their governance and legal frameworks, as well as their data standards, to enable the use of broader sources of non-official data, which they vet and standardize for SDG monitoring. CEPEI and SDSN TReNDS played the brokers in the partnership, bringing together the actors, facilitating and enabling discussion on data standards, norms, legal and governance frameworks, to enable new data sharing partnerships.[33]

These anecdotal examples show the range of functions that civil society groups can play, helping to mobilize diverse actors and broker new global partnerships.

It is clear, that as the sustainable development challenge intensifies in the face of climate change and natural disasters, CSOs will have an increasingly important role to play supporting governments, holding them to account, and filling gaps in service coverage, working both independently and as part of public-private partnerships. As such, being able to quantify and map their contribution will be hugely important so we can identify gaps and unmet needs, but also so we can hold CSOs to high performance standards.

SUPPORTING CSOS' GOOD PRACTICE

As the quantitative evidence and case studies provided serve to demonstrate, civil society plays a crucial role in supporting sustainable development and in responding to humanitarian challenges. The international donor community needs to shore up and maintain their support to these diverse actors to ensure their increased engagement in the face of complex sustainable development challenges and crises. However, to do this effectively and efficiently, donors need better means of classifying civil society in order to provide more targeted resources and assistance. Specific recommendations include developing targeted funding and support mechanisms, providing active support to ensure civil society has as safe operating environment, supporting them to identify entry points to engage with and (where appropriate) support governments, and to use data and evidence to carefully document their impact.

Developed Tailored Funding Mechanisms for Diverse Civil Society

To scale up civil society best practices, the international donor community needs a more nuanced and careful framing of different types of civil society which lay out their comparative advantages and limitations. The ten categories identified by the World Economic Forum or the five overarching areas of work laid out above may be a helpful starting point. Funding mechanisms then need to be designed to cater to civil societies' specific needs. Whilst INGOs and large charities may be able to access international funding and cope with burdensome reporting requirements, smaller domestic charities should be able to access the same funding through a national intermediary who can help them translate the requirements, explain their mission, and report on their activities without having to instigate whole new burdensome proposal development and reporting processes. To provide another example, donor support for academic institutions and for research should be framed in such a way so as to enable free enquiry and not the kinds of outcomes the donor wants to see. Only then, independent research can be conducted. In addition, think tanks and academic institutions should be given the opportunity to apply for resources to support and enable their brokering functions. As highlighted by the example of CEPEI in Colombia, academia can play a helpful role as neutral facilitators of community dialogue.

Protect Civil Societies' Enabling Environment

For civil society to play the various roles outlined above, not least of as watchdogs of government, as well as other public and private activity, they need a safe and supportive legal and operating environment. This includes freedom of association, assembly and expression.

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As highlighted by the recent CIVICUS Monitor report, the enabling environment for civil society has unfortunately been closing in recent years. And even over the course of 2018 two more countries were added to the list of 111 countries who limit basic freedoms of assembly and association.[34]

> "In practice, this means that repression of peaceful civic activism continues to represent a widespread crisis for civil society in all parts of the world, with just 4% of the world's population living in countries where governments are properly respecting the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression."[35]

It is therefore critical that donors and the international community, first and foremost, look to strengthen the enabling environment in their own countries, whilst also supporting activities (advocacy and monitoring) that track the freedoms of civil society in other countries. Also important is to support civil society and academia to document the negative effects of restrictive civil society legislation to make a more instrumental case of how engaging civil society can support wider societal and economic interests.

Create Entry Points for CSO-Government Engagement
As highlighted by the BudgIT, GFATM and Colombia data reconciliation initiatives cited above, CSOs can play a pivotal role in supporting effective fundraising, allocation and use of finite public resources, they can help broker public-private partnerships, and can contribute new data, however, to do so, they need platforms and opportunities to engage with government. Donors and the international community should use their leverage and influence to help create entry points for CSO engagement within national government planning and budgetary processes. This should include both external opportunities such consultations, but also meaningful engagement opportunities within government, for example having civil society representatives appointed to national SDG Planning Committees, as in Colombia, Finland and Lebanon.[36]

Support Civil Society to Document Impact
Crucial to effective scaling up of CSO activities is a clear documentation of what works. As highlighted by this paper, with quantitative and qualitative evidence of impact it is far easier to decipher which forms of civil society and what activities will be most effective within a given context. However, evidence of CSO impact is incredibly scarce and seldom documented in peer-reviewed, independent literature. Donors and the international community should therefore make a conscious and deliberate effort to provide support to CSO groups to actively document their impact and to monitor their contributions over time.

Thereby a more positive learning environment can be encouraged which recognizes that some form of failure or set back is inevitable within any project. This however, enables organizations to use this feedback to enhance their performance. This is as opposed to additional monitoring being seen as a benchmarking exercise to dictate future funding levels. Importantly, donor support should include resourcing for third parties, such as local academic institutions, who can independently assess and document project impacts, using both quantitative and qualitative evidence.

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