



ENABLING CIVIL SOCIETY

DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION **FUNDAMENTALS**

WHAT IS CIVIL SOCIETY?

Civil society refers to uncoerced human association or interaction by which individuals implement individual or collective action to address shared needs, ideas, interests, values, faith, and beliefs that they have identified in common, as well as the formal, semi- or non-formal forms of associations and the individuals involved in them. Civil society is distinct from states, private for-profit enterprises, and the family.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are an organisational representation of civil society.

Civic space is the physical, virtual, legal, regulatory, and policy space where people can, among other things, securely exercise their rights to the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and expression, in keeping with human rights.



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

- **CSOs are important agents of change.** They have a vital role in bringing the voices of those on the frontlines of poverty, inequality and vulnerability into development and humanitarian processes, thus helping to meet the 2030 Agenda promise to leave no one behind.
- **Enabling environments for civil society** and effectiveness principles are necessary if CSOs are to maximise their contributions to development.

BUT

Studies show that:

- **Resources** supporting civil society are not provided in an effective way.
- **Legal and regulatory restrictions** shrink civic space and increasingly impact civil society's ability to operate.
- CSOs' **effectiveness, accountability** and **transparency** need to be incentivised.



Diverse voices, knowledge and experiences feed into development and humanitarian processes



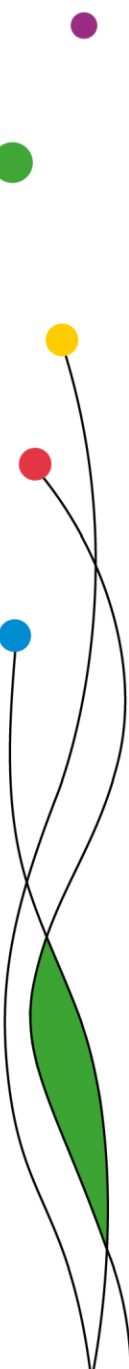
CSOs' actions help reach vulnerable or marginalised people, and complement state and private sector actions



CSOs strengthen public engagement, hold governments to account, and foster debate and democratisation



Inclusive development processes



BASIC STANDARDS

The 2021 [OECD DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance](#) identifies three inter-linked pillars to guide development co-operation and humanitarian assistance providers in enabling civil society:

1. Respecting, protecting and promoting civic space



3. Incentivising the effectiveness, transparency and accountability of CSOs

2. Supporting and engaging with civil society

Pillar II.4 of the [OECD DAC Peer Review Analytical Framework](#) on partnering with civil society highlights the need for members to (i) leverage and enable the independent role of international, member country and partner country civil society in all its diversity as a source of expertise, resources and services and as a channel for representation; and (ii) to support civil society space in partner countries.



GOOD PRACTICES



Actively respecting, protecting and promoting civic space

Monitoring and taking co-ordinated action to prevent the closing of civic space, and strengthening support to human rights defenders, are some important methods to strengthen civil society in partner countries. It is also critical to address risks and inequalities linked to digital technology that restrict or exclude civil society, including by collaborating with the private sector and independent media.

- The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation's (SDC) report [Responding to the Contested Space for Civil Society](#) analyses threats to civic space and puts forward individual and joint response measures for donors.
- The European Commission is [strengthening civil society in partner countries](#) to protect and expand civic space, including through support to global umbrella groups to co-ordinate actions and strengthen accountability to partner country civil society; protecting freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, and an independent media; establishing an enabling environment monitoring mechanism; and providing flexible funding for civil society actors in crisis.
- The Netherlands is [supporting an inclusive and human rights-based approach to technology and the protection of civic space online](#) by encouraging digital safety and inclusion of civil society, and the protection of human rights online.
- [Tech for Democracy](#) is a Danish initiative bringing together representatives from governments, multilaterals, the tech industry and civil society. It includes a [Digital Democracy Initiative](#) with the European Union to support partner country civil society to promote and protect their rights.



GOOD PRACTICES



Setting clear policies for enabling civil society

A policy framework is needed which should provide a clear definition of civil society, acknowledge its diversity and take a clear position on the value of an inclusive and independent civil society. It should outline the objectives, visions and ways of working, while recognising contextual risks, in particular in relation to civic space.

- The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation's (Norad) [Principles for Support to Civil Society](#) establish a cohesive framework for Norad's support to and dialogue with civil society. They provide a rationale and meaning for each principle as well as actions that civil society and Norad can undertake to meet, promote and align with the principles.
- The [French Government's Strategic guidance paper 2023-2027: civil society and civic engagement](#) contains five strategic priorities: promoting a supportive environment and open civic space; supporting CSOs' development and organisation; developing partnerships; strengthening civic engagement; and supporting CSOs as advocates.

Developing and monitoring such policies in collaboration with CSOs enables shared understanding and ownership.

- Canadian CSOs contributed to the definition of [Canada's Civil Society Partnerships Policy](#) (CSPP) for International Assistance. CSOs are also engaged in developing the CSPP implementation plan and reviewing it through annual meetings.
- The Korean NGO council for overseas development co-operation and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (Koica) have developed a shared [Policy Framework for Government-CSO Partnership](#). They monitor its implementation jointly twice a year.



GOOD PRACTICES



Embracing dual objectives for engaging with civil society

Supporting CSOs can have both intrinsic value, i.e. strengthening an independent and diverse civil society in partner countries, and instrumental value, i.e. strengthening their role as implementing partners. Embracing both objectives can enable democratic ownership and locally-rooted development.

- USAID works with civil society to achieve its specific development objectives as well as to support a [democratic political culture](#) through a strong, vibrant and diverse civil society. This includes enabling women and girls' civic and political leadership and peaceful mass movements.
- [Iceland's 2019-23 policy for international development co-operation](#) outlines that support is provided for CSOs as project implementers and aims to promote an independent, powerful and diverse civil society in developing countries.
- One of the key objectives of [Finnish development policy](#) is to strengthen civil society in developing countries and to support civil society actors' work towards achieving development goals.
- The [Netherlands' "Dialogue and Dissent" programme](#), and its successor, "Power of Voices", support CSOs in partner countries with a track record in advocacy to strengthen their capacities and pursue advocacy goals to represent and protect the interests of their constituencies as effectively as possible.
- [SDC's Civil Society Support Facility](#) supports partner country CSOs to become drivers of social change in North Macedonia. It does so through a competitive grant scheme which supports CSOs' institutional development, as well as through specific projects.



GOOD PRACTICES



Aligning funding mechanisms with policy objectives

Rectifying the imbalance between project/programme support mechanisms (flows *through* CSOs) and core support mechanisms (flows *to* CSOs) can support CSOs' right of initiative while strengthening their internal capacities.

- Ireland provides high levels of core support and flexible and predictable [funding to civil society](#) partners for both development and humanitarian programmes.

Providing support to diverse civil society actors and shifting additional financial support, including core support, to partner country civil society help to strengthen a pluralist civil society and enhance local leadership.

- Italy has widened its eligibility criteria to allow funding of smaller CSOs that enter into partnerships or consortia with international CSOs.
- Germany's [Blue Action Fund](#) (BAF) and [Legacy Landscapes Fund](#) (LLF) provide direct grants to local civil society in partner countries to expand their activities.
- USAID's [Centroamérica Local](#) programme (in Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) is designed to engage, strengthen and fund local civil society actors to implement programming on growth, governance, corruption, human rights protection, and combatting gender-based violence.



GOOD PRACTICES



Engaging in meaningful dialogue

Dialogue contributes to learning, relevant and high-quality policies and programmes, and builds mutual trust and accountability among DAC members, CSOs and partner countries. Engaging stakeholders from wider policy arenas than development can help advance policy coherence. Balancing institutionalised and ad hoc dialogue, generous timelines and co-ordination in partner countries can help improve the quality and efficiency of such dialogue.

- The French [National Council for Development and International Solidarity](#) (CNDSI) is a multi-stakeholder forum that includes various components of civil society. Its regular high-level dialogue explores the objectives, guidelines, coherence and means of French development policy.
- The Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation's (AECID) [manual on country partnership frameworks](#) is clear on the need to consult CSOs in the partner country when designing, implementing and monitoring partnership frameworks.
- Denmark is committed to consultation and dialogue at home and in its partner countries. Recent work on civic space built on strong collaboration with domestic civil society. Partners also appreciated the in-depth consultative process and commitment to building a shared vision and objectives.

Supporting dialogue between CSOs and partner country governments and the private sector is instrumental in strengthening civic space.

- The EU [Policy Forum on Development](#) brings together CSOs and local authorities through regular, regional and sectoral dialogues to discuss cross-cutting issues, promote policy debate and exchange information and experience.



GOOD PRACTICES



Streamlining and adapting administrative and reporting requirements

Using CSOs' own, or co-defined, formats and systems, contributing to multi-year funding or pooled funding, as well as adapting requirements to contribution size and risk level, can all reduce the administrative and financial requirements of partnering with CSOs.

- Australia's [accreditation](#) process is reported to streamline due diligence and reduce transaction costs for both CSOs and the donor.
- The multi-donor [Partnership Fund for a Resilient Ukraine](#), designed with the Government of Ukraine and based on extensive context analysis, focuses on supporting reforms in conflict-affected areas in the east and south. It works through partnerships and by strengthening Ukrainian civil society and other local stakeholders.
- The Czech Republic has streamlined its procedures to allow a quick response in fragile contexts ([e.g. in Ukraine](#)) by fast-tracking the endorsement of project proposals and allowing for flexibility in timeframes and reporting requirements.

Iterative and adaptive approaches to results management are particularly relevant when working on social and institutional changes but require receptivity to learning.

- USAID's [collaborating, learning and adapting](#) (CLA) approach reduces duplication through knowledge sharing and co-ordination, and improves effectiveness by grounding programmes in evidence or practices that show promise.



GOOD PRACTICES



Investing in CSOs' institutional capacities and fostering ownership

Supporting CSOs' efforts to develop internal systems to meet human rights and international standards, and to collaborate, learn and co-ordinate among themselves, can boost their effectiveness.

- The Mexican Agency for International Co-operation for Development (AMEXCID) engaged with Germany's development agency (GIZ) through the Civil Society Program [PROFOSC](#) to strengthen Mexican CSOs and their capacities to network and exchange good practices and lessons. It also worked with [UNDP](#) to build CSOs' capacities to include human rights and gender perspectives in their work.
- Through [triangular co-operation](#), the UK supports Indian CSOs in Africa to foster research collaboration, learning and exchange of experiences across sectors such as agriculture, health, nutrition and natural resources.

Using CSO-defined results and indicators can strengthen CSOs' monitoring and learning function.

- The yearly outcome monitoring and reporting of the Belgian Federal Public Service for Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Co-operation was developed in consultation with Belgian CSOs and combines government requirements and CSOs' indicators (see p. 91 [here](#)).

Supporting more equitable partnerships with local civil society and investing in their institutional capacities can strengthen the local enabling environment while building on the comparative advantages of each partner.

- Funding mechanisms in New Zealand's [Partnering for Impact](#) (P4I) programme build incentives into the programme to encourage partnerships with local organisations, including support for local civil society's overhead costs. This contributes to local ownership and capacity strengthening.



GOOD PRACTICES



Supporting transparency and accountability

Member policies and practices may undermine CSO accountability and legitimacy in partner countries. However, supporting CSOs to strengthen transparency and accountability can positively contribute to open civic spaces.

- [Norad's Guiding Principles](#) call on CSOs to be accountable to the affected populations including through the development and implementation of publicly available ethical guidelines, and whistle-blowing channels for financial irregularities, sexual harassment or other misconduct.
- Sweden's Sida supports the [CSO-led Global Standard for CSO Accountability](#), which offers a reference standard to transform how CSOs understand and practise accountability. The standard works with partner country civil society networks to establish context-specific accountability mechanisms.

Improving member transparency over their country-disaggregated CSO flows makes data more readily accessible to partner country stakeholders. However, transparency needs to be balanced with potential risks for funded civil society actors in sensitive environments.

- The [Liberia Project Dashboard](#) is a database of aid disbursements in the country which includes financial, sector, Sustainable Development Goals, geographic, and implementing partner information.
- The UK, Netherlands and Belgium request their CSO partners to report official funds received to the [International Aid Transparency Initiative](#), though data is not always disaggregated to the level of the partner country to which it flows.



MEASURING SUCCESS

- ▶ Policies are in place for working with CSOs and for respecting, protecting and promoting civic space.
- ▶ Steps are being taken, including with other donors, international, regional and national bodies, to respect, protect and promote civic space.
- ▶ CSOs are direct actors in the definition, implementation and monitoring of public policies in member and partner countries.
- ▶ A wide range of CSOs from member and partner countries are supported in their own right and as implementing partners to fulfill their own objectives and contribute to development outcomes.
- ▶ Administrative and financial requirements are proportionate to risks and contribution size.
- ▶ Results management emphasises learning and adaptation.
- ▶ CSOs' effectiveness, transparency and accountability are incentivised and supported, while information on providers' CSO funding is accessible.
- ▶ Efforts are in place to support the leadership of local civil society actors in partner countries.



RESOURCES

The 2021 [DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance](#) identifies three inter-linked pillars for how development co-operation and humanitarian assistance providers can enable civil society.

The 2020 OECD study on how [Development Assistance Committee Members engage with civil society](#) presents current practices and action points for making DAC members' engagement more effective.

The Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation's Task Team's 2019 [Guidance and Good Practice on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment](#) explains what the international commitments to support CSOs' enabling environment and development effectiveness mean in practice for different development actors.

The OECD 2020 foresight policy paper on [Digital transformation and the futures of civic space to 2030](#) aims to support providers of development co-operation to turn a range of plausible futures for civic space into positive policy action today.

The OECD's 2023 [Funding Civil Society in Partner Countries – Toolkit to support implementation of the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society](#) provides guidance on how to support civil society in partner countries.

Relevant topics in this series

[Global education, raising awareness and public support](#): CSOs are key stakeholders for public outreach.

[Policy coherence for development](#): domestic policies impact enabling environments for civil society in donor and partner countries.

Locally-led development: brings additional dimensions to support local agency in development co-operation [forthcoming].

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DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION FUNDAMENTALS

This series unpacks development co-operation standards and illustrates how DAC members are applying them. Applying standards can help all actors to fulfil their ambitions and commitments.

Each *Fundamentals* document introduces a key aspect of effective development co-operation, sets out *basic standards*, offers *good practice* examples, and identifies *relevant resources*.

Other topics in this series, which will be expanded and updated over time, can be found on the [Development Co-operation TIPs • Tools Insights Practices](#) peer learning platform. For comments, contact DCD.TIPs@oecd.org.

