



# DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION TIPS TOOLS INSIGHTS PRACTICES

## In practice

# IRELAND'S INNOVATIVE FUNDING EMPOWERS CIVIL SOCIETY PARTNERS

### Key messages

Ireland provides flexible and predictable funding and high levels of core support to civil society partners for both development and humanitarian programmes. At the centre of its approach is a competitive and rigorous application process focused on capacity, policies and theories of change. The funding has strengthened civil society organisations' capacity to plan ahead and adapt to context, while lowering their administrative burden.

### Keywords

[Civil society](#) | [Crises, fragility and humanitarian assistance](#) | [Innovation](#) | [Partnerships](#) | [Risk management](#)

### Key partner

[Ireland](#)

### Challenge

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have a crucial role in advancing sustainable development. When development co-operation provides flexible and long-term funding, this lowers CSOs' transaction costs and allows them to concentrate on long-term approaches that better respond to their partner countries' priorities. It also strengthens a strong, pluralistic civil society at home and in partner countries. However, development co-operation providers seek assurance that CSO activities are aligned to some degree with providers' policy priorities. They also need to manage fears of higher financial risks when funding is not clearly earmarked for specific themes, and to demonstrate that their official development assistance (ODA) investments have a tangible and visible impact in the short term. Striking a balance in addressing these challenges is in line with the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian assistance to which Ireland adheres.

### Approach

The following are key features of Ireland's approach to CSO funding:

- **A high share of long-term and flexible funding:** CSOs (mostly from Ireland, but also international and partner country-based organisations) receive more than a third of Ireland's bilateral ODA and Ireland's programme grants extend to five years.
- **Balancing CSO autonomy and accountability:** A competitive application process for Ireland's [civil society programme funding \(now called Ireland's Civil Society Partnership, ICSP\)](#) assesses their policies and theory of change to ensure they align with Ireland's policies. It also evaluates their capacity to enable change at micro, meso and macro level; as well as their organisational capacity and accountability, in order to reassure partners over financial risk, partnerships and outreach.
- **Breaking down funding silos:** Initially, Ireland aligned its development and humanitarian funding cycles and tested blending both funds. The current ICSP continues to align the funding cycles, and brings together the streams for development, chronic and acute humanitarian crises, and global citizenship education, allowing CSOs to engage flexibly based on their respective strengths.
- **Extra-rapid and innovative CSO crisis funding:** Through the [Emergency Response Fund Scheme](#), funding is pre-positioned with trusted CSO partners at the start of the year – those with strong capacity to respond directly to new crises. This ensures a speedy and appropriate response to identified needs. The [Start Fund](#), collectively owned and operated by CSOs, allows for an initial response to small to medium-scale emergencies, releasing funds within 72 hours of being alerted for projects implemented within 45 days.
- **Joint approaches with other development partners**, including pooled funds in partner countries, and engaging actively in their management and the political dialogue with development partners, CSOs, and partner country governments on political issues the funds address or that arise from them.
- **Encouraging CSOs and multilaterals to partner with local CSOs** to strengthen locally-led action through supporting and empowering local actors and promoting civil society space.

## Results

- **An effective response to complex humanitarian and development challenges.** The [2021 Formative Evaluation of the Programme Grant II and Humanitarian Programme Plan](#) found strong evidence for this. It also found evidence of good practice in Ireland's support to NGO partners for governance, safeguarding, and financial and risk management.
- **Partners are able to plan ahead, adapt to changing contexts, save money and retain key staff.** The [OECD development co-operation peer review of Ireland](#) found that Ireland's flexible funding, and its inclusion of core support, provides the freedom and predictability to tailor responses to evolving crises in fragile contexts. The review also highlighted that Ireland is a recognised lead advocate for civic space in partner countries, providing an important complement to its funding.
- **Flexibility for CSOs to prioritise their strategic areas according to their own mandate and strategic focus.** This allows CSOs to draw on their own experience and comparative advantages in designing and implementing their programming. At the same time, the above evaluation also finds that CSOs are required to provide robust evidence that their programming is contributing to Ireland's strategic ambitions.
- **An immediate response by CSOs to many crises.** This finding by an [external review](#) acknowledges the vital role of the Emergency Response Fund Scheme (ERFS) in Ireland's humanitarian response. In its first 10 years of existence, the ERFS released more than €24 million in humanitarian funding. These funds enabled Irish Aid's NGO partners to respond promptly to over 200 emergencies in more than 40 countries.

## Lessons learnt

Ireland has drawn the following broader lessons from external reviews and internal reflection:

- **Be clear about how CSO contributions link to Ireland's government policy priorities:** CSO partners are required to develop programmes based on a clear theory of change. This can outline how CSO work contributes to government policy objectives while respecting the independent role of civil society. This helps identify areas for policy engagement with civil society and provides a basis for tracking results of flexible CSO funding.
- **Organisational capacity is an important element to consider in funding allocations.** This means understanding where a CSO adds value, where it requires support for its organisational development and how its performance will be assessed. Early engagement with potential applicants can help them strengthen capacity in time for their application.
- **Maintain staff capacity through a team approach:** Staff turn-over makes engaging in strategic partnerships (rather than project oversight) challenging. A team approach can help maintain capacity that combines an understanding of Ireland's policy priorities with CSO governance.

## Further information

Department of Foreign Affairs (2021), *Formative Evaluation of the Programme Grant II (2017-2021) & Humanitarian Programme Plan (2019-2021)*, [www.dfa.ie/media/dfa/publications/PGII-HPP-Evaluation-Report-Final-1.pdf](http://www.dfa.ie/media/dfa/publications/PGII-HPP-Evaluation-Report-Final-1.pdf).

Irish Aid (2019). *External Review of the Emergency Response Fund Scheme*, [www.irishaid.ie/media/irishaid/whatwedo/whoweworkwith/civilsociety/External-Review-of-the-Emergency-Response-Fund-Scheme-ERFS-Review-March-2019.pdf](http://www.irishaid.ie/media/irishaid/whatwedo/whoweworkwith/civilsociety/External-Review-of-the-Emergency-Response-Fund-Scheme-ERFS-Review-March-2019.pdf).

Irish Aid webpage: *Civil society*, [www.irishaid.ie/what-we-do/who-we-work-with/civil-society](http://www.irishaid.ie/what-we-do/who-we-work-with/civil-society).

## OECD resources

OECD (2023), *Funding Civil Society in Partner Countries: Toolkit for Implementing the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9ea40a9c-en>.

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

OECD (2020), *Development Assistance Committee Members and Civil Society, The Development Dimension*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/51eb6df1-en>.

OECD webpage: *Civil Society Engagement in Development Co-operation*, [www.oecd.org/dac/civil-society-engagement-in-development-co-operation.htm](http://www.oecd.org/dac/civil-society-engagement-in-development-co-operation.htm).

## To learn more about Ireland's development co-operation see:

OECD (2023), "Ireland", in *Development Co-operation Profiles*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/941ec6f0-en>.

OECD (2020), *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: Ireland 2020*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/c20f6995-en>.

See more *In Practice* examples from Ireland here: <https://www.oecd.org/development-cooperation-learning/?tag-key+partner=ireland#search>

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