Executive summary

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is clear on the need to mobilise civil society organisations (CSOs) to implement and uphold accountability for progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. CSOs fill critical roles. They provide services in development and humanitarian situations, influence policies through dialogue and advocacy, and promote and protect human rights and democratisation. Their ability to reach people on the frontlines of poverty, inequality and vulnerability make them integral to fulfilling the 2030 Agenda promise to leave no one behind. CSOs are important to development co-operation, both as independent development actors and as implementing partners on behalf of members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC). According to OECD statistics, DAC members (hereinafter "members") allocated nearly USD 21 billion for CSOs in 2018, amounting to 15% of total bilateral aid.

Members have committed to providing and promoting enabling environments for civil society, including by ensuring that their work with civil society and the CSOs in it is effective. Yet evidence indicates that more must be done to provide and promote enabling environments. Around the world, legal and regulatory frameworks are being used to shrink civic space, limiting the possibilities for people to come together to improve lives. At the same time, there are gaps in CSOs' effectiveness and accountability. Donors, including members, struggle to appropriately leverage CSOs' knowledge, capabilities and influential role as public advocates for sustainable development, and they struggle to offer effective support for CSOs.

Building on key findings from surveys of and consultations with members and CSOs, *Development Assistance Committee Members and Civil Society* presents action points for members and the OECD DAC to make members' support for and engagement with CSOs and civil society more effective.

Key findings

- There is commonality in member definitions of CSOs, but also differences that may impede coherence of member actions.
- Most members have a policy document that covers their work with CSOs and civil society and is contained in either legislation, policies, strategies, guidelines, principles or action plans. About half have a civil society or CSO-specific policy document.
- CSOs call for greater integration of civil society considerations across a wide range of member policies.
- Most members have at least two types of objectives: to strengthen a pluralist and independent civil society in partner countries and to meet other development objectives beyond strengthening civil society in partner countries.
- Members more frequently cite the advantages rather than disadvantages of working with CSOs. Members also more frequently cite advantages of member country or international CSOs than of working with partner country CSOs.
- Members provide more financial support as project and/or programme support *through* CSOs than as partnership, framework and core support *to* CSO. Such support is considered better suited to

demonstrating tangible development results in the short term. CSOs experience members' financial support as short-term, overly directive and conditioned on member-defined priorities.

- A disproportionate amount of member funding is allocated to member country and international CSOs relative to partner country CSOs. Among the reasons cited for favouring these CSOs are members' legal or administrative requirements; transaction cost considerations; these CSOs' experience, including in demonstrating results; and their role in public awareness raising. Member funding also tends to flow to formal CSOs rather than extending to broader civil society.
- Systematic dialogue with CSOs is much more common at headquarters level than at partner country level. Dialogue does not necessarily meet good practice standards such as inclusivity, joint agenda setting, co-ordination among members, accessibility and timelines.
- CSOs and members continue to experience the administrative requirements and transaction costs associated with accessing and reporting on member funding as overly burdensome. Meeting these requirements means CSOs divert resources from their core work and the achievement of development results.
- Members are adopting more iterative and adaptive approaches to monitoring in growing recognition that inflexible application of results-based management that is focused on quick-win, quantitative and linear results can undermine CSOs' ability to innovate, take risks, be flexible and responsive to partners and situations on the ground, and address complex development problems towards long-term, transformative and sustainable change.
- Members encourage CSOs to foster relationships of greater accountability in partner countries, but do not adequately assess how the emphasis on upward accountability to members in their policies and practices may undermine CSO accountability at partner country level. While members are increasingly transparent about their financial flows to CSOs, the information is not always readily accessible to partner country stakeholders or disaggregated by partner country.

Based on these findings, this study offers the following action points for DAC members and the OECD DAC for improving their support for and engagement with CSOs and civil society.

Action points for DAC members

- Clarify definitions of CSOs and civil society towards establishing a common understanding across members and more broadly recognising civil society's diversity.
- In consultation with CSOs, develop policies that address both the member's objectives and ways of working with CSOs and civil society and contextual issues including civic space. Integrate civil society considerations across policy realms other than development co-operation.
- Embrace the two types of objectives for working with CSOs and civil society: to strengthen a pluralist and independent civil society in partner countries and to meet other development objectives beyond strengthening civil society in partner countries.
- Use a variety of strategies to rectify the imbalance between project/programme support and flows *through* CSOs as programme implementers on behalf of members, on one hand, and partnership/framework/core support and flows *to* CSOs as independent development actors, on the other.
- Augment direct financial support for partner country CSOs and support for a broader swathe of civil society including for more fluid and informal forms of association, new types of associations, and traditional civic actors.
- Make dialogue and consultation with CSOs and civil society more systematic and place greater emphasis on systematic dialogue at partner country level, while paying attention to good practice.

Encourage dialogue on policy realms other than development co-operation, such as on members' foreign policy and private sector investment and trade policies.

- Assess, minimise and monitor the transaction cost burden of members' administrative requirements, including by co-ordinating and harmonising requirements with other members based on the 2013 Code of Practice on Donor Harmonisation.
- Work with CSOs to define relevant, locally owned results frameworks and indicators while applying iterative and adaptive approaches to results management. Explore results indicators for strengthening a pluralist and independent civil society in partner countries.
- Support CSOs' accountability in partner countries using a mix of methods, while also enhancing member transparency and ensuring that member practices for working with CSOs and civil society do no harm to CSOs' partner country-level accountability.

Action points for the OECD DAC

- Develop up-to-date guidance on how members should work with CSOs and civil society or issue a recommendation for greater enforcement potential.
- Initiate discussion with members on the DAC reporting directives that pertain to definitions of civil society and CSOs and on the usefulness and accuracy of *to* and *through* coding of financial flows for CSOs.

The action points are offered for further discussion among members and CSOs, with a view to ultimately develop these action points – in consultation with members, CSOs and others beginning in 2020 – into a guidance or a recommendation for how members can more effectively work with civil society and, by extension, can improve enabling environments for civil society.

Infographic 1. How Development Assistance Committee Members and Civil Society work together

DAC SUPPORT TO CSOs IN NUMBERS

Figures from 2018

DAC members allocated **USD 21 billion - 15% of total bilateral ODA**

Member country and international CSOs receive a **disproportionate amount of funding (93%)**

Of **DAC support** for CSOs, **85%** goes **THROUGH CSOs** as implementers of **DAC members' projects**

15% goes **TO CSOs** to support them as **independent development actors**

Member country CSOs contribute an estimated **USD 42 billion** in private contributions to **development co-operation**

WHAT'S WORKING WELL

✓ Members appreciate CSOs' **on-the-ground knowledge**, proximity to **beneficiaries** and ability to reach **vulnerable and marginalised people**, critical to the SDGs and **leaving no one behind.**

✓ Most members' objectives for working with CSOs include **strengthening civil society** in developing countries, and **implementing members' projects.**

✓ **Systematic dialogue** between **members and CSOs** is on the rise, especially at **headquarters level.**

✓ Some members are making efforts to **streamline administrative requirements** and implement flexible, learning-oriented **results management.**

WAYS TO WORK BETTER

OBJECTIVES

Reflect not only the **instrumental value of CSOs as implementers**, but also the **intrinsic value** of a **strong, pluralist** and **independent civil society.**

FUNDING

Improve coherence between objectives and ways of working with CSOs by **rectifying the imbalance** between **support through and to CSOs** and other methods.

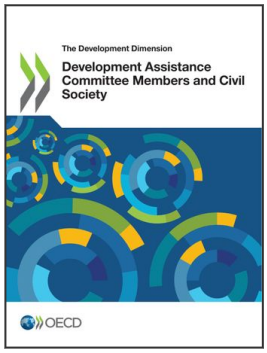
ADMINISTRATION AND RESULTS MANAGEMENT

Streamline and harmonise administrative requirements and adopt adaptive, flexible, learning-oriented **results management.**

IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Expand funding and **dialogue** to developing country CSOs and a wider swathe of **civil society actors.**

Work together to develop OECD DAC guidance or a recommendation to improve how members work with CSOs.



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