

Overview: Enabling civil society through effective development co-operation

Development Assistance Committee members, recognising the important development role of civil society, channel nearly USD 21 billion, or 15% of all bilateral official development assistance, to civil society organisations (CSOs). To ensure they are effectively supporting CSOs as part of enabling environments for civil society, members should clarify their civil society policies, ease the administrative burden on CSOs, and enhance CSOs' legitimacy and accountability through less rigid steering of funds and programmes. This Overview of data, survey responses and relevant literature evaluates the current state of member-CSO relations and presents action points to further improve them.

Civil society and the civil society organisations (CSOs) in it are important development actors. CSOs fill roles as providers of services in development and humanitarian situations. They contribute to policy development through dialogue and advocacy. They are leaders in the promotion and protection of human rights and democratisation. CSOs are appreciated for their experience, expertise, and quick and flexible response. They are also valued for their ability to identify new as well as longstanding and often systemic obstacles to social, economic and democratic development and for their capacity to innovate, elaborate and implement solutions.

CSOs are important to development co-operation, both as development actors in their own right and as implementing partners for members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC). Statistics from the OECD show that in 2018, DAC members (hereinafter “members”) allocated almost USD 21 billion for CSOs, amounting to 15% of total bilateral official development assistance (ODA) (OECD, 2020^[1]). Member country CSOs also bring considerable privately sourced contributions, estimated at USD 42 billion in 2018, to development co-operation (OECD, 2020^[1]).

The significance of CSOs in development is widely recognised. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is clear on the need for all development actors inclusive of CSOs to engage in implementation and monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The strengthened global partnership for achievement of SDG 17 (revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development) is meant to involve all levels of government, the private sector and civil society, among others, in a whole-of-society approach to SDG achievement. Further, CSOs play a crucial role in facilitating people’s participation and the pursuit of accountability. In this sense, they also are critical to achieving SDG 16 (promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies) and are part and parcel of such societies and the accountable institutions called for in this SDG. The 2018 OECD report, *Development Co-operation Report, Joining Forces to Leave No One Behind*, highlights the vital role of CSOs in bringing the voices of those on the frontlines of poverty, inequality and vulnerability into development processes and thus in helping to meet the 2030 Agenda promise to leave no one behind (OECD, 2018^[2]). In addition, the Grand Bargain sees CSOs as key partners in relation to humanitarian action and commits Grand Bargain adherents to work with CSOs effectively and efficiently (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2019^[3]).

Since the 2008 High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, the multi-stakeholder constituency of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (GPEDC) fully acknowledges the development role of CSOs, both as implementing partners of development co-operation providers, partner country governments and the private sector and as independent development actors in their own right (OECD, 2008^[4]). The GPEDC – inclusive of members and other development co-operation providers as well as partner country governments, CSOs and others – also recognises that enabling environments are necessary if CSOs are to maximise their contributions to development. At the high level and senior level meetings in 2016 and 2019, the GPEDC reaffirmed commitments to provide enabling environments for CSOs and to promote CSOs’ development effectiveness (GPEDC, 2016^[5]; GPEDC, 2019^[6]). The GPEDC monitoring framework reflects these commitments in its Indicator 2, which assesses enabling environments for civil society in terms of the presence of space for CSOs in policy dialogue; effective support for and engagement with CSOs by official development co-operation providers; enabling legal and regulatory frameworks for CSOs; and effective, accountable and transparent CSOs (GPEDC, 2018^[7]).

Nonetheless, evidence indicates more must be done to create and protect enabling environments for CSOs and civil society (Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment, 2014^[8]; OECD/UNDP, 2016^[9]; OECD/UNDP, 2019^[10]; Brechenmacher and Carothers, 2019^[11]). Around the world, efforts by various governments to restrict the legal, regulatory and policy space (also called civic space) in which civil society operates have grown. Increasingly, governments are using laws, policies and practices to limit the possibilities for people to come together to improve their everyday lives. At the same time, there remain gaps in CSOs’ effectiveness and accountability and concerns about their legitimacy, their results, and the challenges to co-ordination among CSOs and with governments. While there is considerable scope for members to leverage CSOs’ knowledge, capabilities and influential role as public advocates for

sustainable development, members do not yet appear to be offering effective development support for CSOs as part of the enabling environment for civil society.

Development Assistance Committee Members and Civil Society provides a comprehensive review of members' support for and engagement with civil society and the CSOs in it. The study finds that members are making efforts towards providing the type of support and engagement that would enable CSOs to maximise their contribution to development, but that members' policies and practices sometimes fall short. The study is a significant step to support members to reflect on how they can better work with civil society and CSOs in development.

This study is organised in three chapters and two annexes. Chapter 1 presents insights from existing OECD guidance and other relevant literature to draw out lessons and remaining challenges in this area. The main guidance reviewed is the 2012 publication, *Partnering with Civil Society: 12 Lessons from DAC Peer Reviews* (OECD, 2012^[12]). This guidance in turn drew on an earlier overview entitled *How DAC Members Work with Civil Society Organisations* that is similar to, but less comprehensive than, this current study (OECD, 2011^[13]). Chapter 2 reviews OECD statistics on official development assistance (ODA) flows for CSOs and discusses responses of members and CSOs to two separate surveys conducted over 2018 and 2019; members' policy documents that are relevant to their work with civil society; and insights and feedback from online and in-person consultations with both members and CSOs. Members and CSOs were consulted through the International Donor Group on Civil Society, the DAC Community of Practice on Civil Society and the DAC-CSO Reference Group. Preliminary Chapter 2 findings were previously published in a working paper (Wood and Fällman, 2019^[14]). Chapter 3 presents action points for members and the OECD DAC to improve the effectiveness of members' support for and engagement with CSOs and civil society as part of providing enabling environments for civil society. The action points are offered for further discussion among members and CSOs, with a view to ultimately develop them into a guidance or a recommendation. Annex A contains additional information on this study's sources and research methods and Annex B presents data on financial flows for CSOs.

The remainder of this Overview summarises key findings from the Chapter 1 review of the literature and the 2012 OECD guidance and from the Chapter 2 review of the survey and consultation results. The findings pertain to definitions of CSOs and civil society; objectives for working with CSOs and civil society; advantages and disadvantages of working with CSOs; policies for working with CSOs and civil society; financial support mechanisms and recipients; approaches to dialogue and consultation; administrative requirements; monitoring and learning methods; and practices to promote accountability and transparency. The Overview concludes with action points for members and the OECD DAC itself to improve the effectiveness of their work with CSOs and civil society and, by extension, the enabling environment for civil society.

Key findings

Defining CSOs and civil society

Civil society is the collection of CSOs and other semi-formal and non-formal groupings through which people associate. Civil society is also a sphere or space in which CSOs and other groups interact with each other and with others. While there is commonality in member definitions of CSOs (and in definitions of non-governmental organisations or NGOs), there are also differences, especially in the degree to which the definitions reflect the diversity of civil society actors. Members rarely define civil society. Defining civil society and CSOs is not always straightforward because of the diversity of forms of organisation and association across the civil society sector. However, the absence of a common definition may impede member coherence in implementing the action points offered in this study. Additionally, member definitions of CSOs and civil society that are not broad and inclusive may prevent members from engaging with the range of formal and informal groupings that comprise the civil society sector. The OECD and DAC

definitions of CSOs (and NGOs) are a good starting point towards greater commonality of definitions among members.

Policies for working with CSOs and civil society

The majority of members have some form of policy document that covers their work with CSOs and civil society, and approximately half of them have civil society or CSO-specific policy documents. The type of document that members consider to constitute their CSO or civil society policy varies and includes legislation, policies, strategies, guidelines, principles and action plans. Policies are generally developed, and sometimes also monitored, in consultation with CSOs. A CSO and/or civil society policy document is necessary to provide a transparent framework that articulates a member's objectives and ways of working with CSOs and civil society. In addition to calling for a CSO and/or civil society policy, CSOs call for greater integration of civil society considerations, including civic space issues, across a wide range of member country policies to strengthen policy coherence. Policy areas that would benefit from civil society-related coverage include foreign policy and policies on private sector investment, trade, migration, security, taxation and digital technology.

Objectives for working with CSOs and civil society

Members should clearly articulate their objectives for working with CSOs and civil society. Ideally, members have two types of objectives. One will reflect the intrinsic value of a strong, pluralist and independent civil society. The other reflects the instrumental value of CSOs as implementing partners on behalf of members to meet development objectives other than strengthening civil society and usually in specific sectors or themes (e.g. health, education, democratisation and gender). According to their survey responses, almost all members have multiple objectives for working with CSOs and civil society. A majority of members have at least the two aforementioned types of objectives. Significantly, members pursue the strengthening civil society objective using a variety of financial and non-financial practices to promote enabling environments for CSOs and civil society in partner countries. Public awareness raising in member countries is also an important objective for members. There is growing awareness among members that in fragile settings, their objectives should integrate comprehensive and complementary approaches that ultimately reduce needs, as is called for in the DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus (OECD DAC, 2019^[15]).

Advantages and disadvantages of working with CSOs and civil society

Many members see many advantages of working with CSOs such as CSOs' proximity to beneficiaries, their ability to reach people in vulnerable situations or facing high risk of marginalisation, and their capacity to deliver services. At the same time, members experience some countervailing difficulties in working with CSOs such as duplication and lack of co-ordination and the challenge of demonstrating and aggregating results. On balance, however, the survey finds members more frequently cite the advantages rather than disadvantages of working with CSOs. Members also more frequently identify advantages of member country or international CSOs compared to those of working with partner country CSOs, though many advantages are nonetheless attributed to partner country CSOs. A significant and almost equal number of members ascribe the most frequently selected advantages of CSOs to both member country and international CSOs as well as to partner country CSOs, which suggests that each type of CSO has the potential to be valued partners for members. However, the ability of member country CSOs to raise public awareness and engage citizens on development issues in member countries is cited by members as a key advantage of member country or international CSOs but not of partner country CSOs.

How financial support is provided

The most commonly used mechanism of member financial support for CSOs is project and/or programme support. Partnership, framework and core support mechanisms are less commonly used by members. According to OECD statistics for 2018, most financial support for CSOs (85%) flows *through* CSOs as project/programme implementers on behalf of members, with the remaining 15% flowing *to* CSOs as independent development actors in the form of core support. A key reason members favour project/programme support *through* CSOs is that such support is deemed better suited to demonstrating tangible development results in the short term. Still, CSOs experience members' financial support as short-term and overly directive, with many conditions tied to member-defined priorities. Core support is CSOs' preferred type of support. It is also the most development-effective type of support, with advantages such as predictability, flexibility, sustainability, administrative efficiency, and, significantly, ownership and accountability. Whatever type of support is provided for CSOs, it must allow them to respond to the priorities and demands of their partners at partner country level. Rigid steering undermines CSOs' ability to do so, and thus is detrimental to CSOs' partner country-level legitimacy and accountability and may weaken rather than strengthen civil society in partner countries.

Members do pursue the objective of strengthening civil society in partner countries within their project/programme mechanisms and *through* support, for example with support that does not overly rigidly steer CSOs or that involves capacity development of partner country CSOs. Statistics on member flows *to* and *through* CSOs do not adequately assess the extent to which members are pursuing the objective of strengthening civil society in partner countries. More nuanced information on the design of members' mechanisms is needed to assess the match between objectives and type of support.

Who receives financial support

A disproportionate amount of member funding is allocated to member country or international CSOs relative to partner country CSOs, even though members cite many of the same advantages (and disadvantages) of working with member country or international CSOs that they cite regarding working with partner country CSOs. Members have a range of reasons for favouring member country or international CSOs. These include members' legal, regulatory and administrative requirements and, relatedly, transaction cost considerations such as limited member capacity to administer direct support for additional small and often (though not necessarily) less experienced partner country CSOs. Other reasons are the extensive experience and expertise of member country and international CSOs, including in demonstrating results, and their knowledge and networks. Member country CSOs also are preferred because they contribute to public awareness raising and citizen engagement at home; member country publics, in general, trust these CSOs; and they play a role in informal diplomacy abroad. The voice of these CSOs and member country publics also informs members' tendency to support member country CSOs.

Member funding also tends to flow to formal CSOs. This means that it may not extend to elements of the rich associational life that make up the broader civil society in both in member and partner countries, such as traditional forms of association (e.g. faith-based groups, trade unions, professional associations, etc.); the growing body of hybrid forms such as social enterprises; and more informal, fluid forms of civil society action that are on the rise. Some members are at the early stages of seeking to work with a wider diversity of civil society actors beyond formal CSOs, including through multi-donor pooled funds.

Dialogue and consultation with CSOs and civil society

All members engage CSOs in dialogue and consultation, with a majority using both systematic, advance-planned dialogue fora and dialogue on an ad hoc basis. Systematic dialogue with CSOs is much more common at headquarters level than at partner country level. Dialogue at partner country level tends to be ad hoc, with approximately one third of members not consulting with CSOs at partner country level at all.

Dialogue does not necessarily meet good practice standards such as inclusivity, joint agenda setting, accessibility and timelines or include feedback mechanisms on uptake (or not) of consultation inputs. Co-ordination of dialogue among members, particularly at partner country level, needs attention to avoid duplication of effort and over-burdening CSOs with consultation demands. CSOs assess they have capacity gaps to adequately participate in dialogue and consultations. At the same time, there are benefits to engaging CSOs in dialogue on topics other than members' development co-operation policies such as foreign policy, private sector investment and trade policies and towards greater relevance and coherence of member policies.

Administrative requirements

CSOs and members continue to experience the administrative requirements and transaction costs associated with accessing and reporting on member funding as overly burdensome. It can be challenging to change such requirements, as they are integral to members' domestic accountability to their governments, parliaments and public. To meet these requirements, however, CSOs divert valuable time and resources from their core work and the achievement of development results on the ground. Even when some members seek to streamline their administrative requirements to reduce the transaction cost burden through multi-year agreements, greater budget flexibility, simplified applications and other practices, CSOs find that new requirements cancel out such streamlining efforts. Some alignment with CSOs' own administrative systems and formats for proposals and reporting is occurring and there is some combining of CSO and member requirements and formats. Yet little in the way of harmonisation of member requirements is evident beyond member participation in multi-donor pooled funds, though these funds are only a partial solution. Members that participated in the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency-led harmonisation initiative that created the 2013 Code of Practice on Donor Harmonisation (Sida, 2019, p. 26^[16]) and associated tools have not followed up on implementing the Code.

Monitoring for results and learning

Monitoring is critical for both members and CSOs to demonstrate that ODA for CSOs is achieving development results. However, inflexible application of results-based management focused on quick-win or quantitative results and linear results chains 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. Yet it is because of these capabilities that members choose to work with CSOs. Members are increasingly adopting more iterative and adaptive approaches to monitoring that are context-sensitive and better integrate learning and flexibility to inform decision making on implementation directions. Investment is needed in CSOs' capacity for results monitoring as members continue to adjust and improve their results management approaches.

A majority of members use agreements (or contracts) with CSOs that include some form of results framework with indicators as the basis for CSOs' monitoring and reporting of their initiatives. Approximately half of members allow CSOs to define or co-define all or some of the indicators. Use of CSO-defined indicators can help to promote relevance, ownership and local-level accountability and reduce the administrative burden on CSOs.

Accountability and transparency of CSOs and members

Their accountability, and perceptions of their accountability, are critical to CSOs' effectiveness as either independent development actors or programme implementers on behalf of members. CSOs tend to prioritise their relationship of upward accountability to members, although accountability of CSOs, and of members, at partner country level is integral to build and maintain CSOs' legitimacy in the partner country where they work. Members use multiple practices to encourage CSOs to foster relationships of greater accountability in partner countries that range from participatory approaches to encouraging CSO

co-ordination and supporting CSO self-regulation mechanisms. However, members inadequately assess how the emphasis in their own policies and practices on upward accountability to members 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. CSOs and members share responsibility for upholding accountability and transparency at partner country level, as these are essential leverage to counter the trend of restricting the space for civil society.

Based on these findings, this study offers the following action points for improving member support for and engagement with CSOs and civil society as part of an enabling environment. The action points for both members and the DAC itself update guidance provided in *Partnering with Civil Society: 12 Lessons from Peer Reviews*, the 2012 OECD report that has been the sole source of DAC guidance on the subject of working with civil society. The action points lay the groundwork for development of a new policy instrument in the form of a guidance or a recommendation on enabling environments for civil society.

Action points for DAC members

- Clarify definitions of CSOs and civil society towards a common understanding across members and greater inclusivity that reflects the diversity of forms of organising and associating across the civil society sector.
- Develop policy documents that address the member's objectives and ways of working with CSOs and civil society as well as contextual issues including civic space. Develop and monitor these policy documents in consultation with CSOs. Integrate civil society considerations including civic space issues across policy realms other than development co-operation that directly or indirectly affect CSOs and civil society.
- 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. Integrate promotion of enabling environments for civil society in partner countries into the strengthening civil society objective. Reflect the importance of complementary humanitarian, development and peace actions and the crucial role and contribution of civil society actors in these actions.
- Rectify the imbalance between project/programme support mechanisms and flows *through* CSOs as programme implementers on behalf of members, on one hand, and partnership/framework/core support mechanisms and flows *to* CSOs as independent development actors, on the other. Implement strategies to help rectify the imbalance, for example by minimising directive-ness and designing *through* support to meet the strengthening civil society in partner countries objective; increasing the availability of core support *to* CSOs; identifying ways to better demonstrate that strengthening a pluralist and independent civil society is a valuable development result; and maintaining multiple financial support mechanisms. Identify and rectify obstacles to incentivising more coherent humanitarian-development-peace approaches in financial support mechanisms.
- Augment direct financial support for partner country CSOs and support for a broader swathe of civil society, including for fluid or informal forms of association, new types of associations such as social enterprises, and traditional civic actors (e.g. professional associations, faith-based organisations and trade unions). Share lessons among members and with CSOs for tackling the reasons that funding tends to miss these CSOs and civil society actors.
- Make dialogue and consultation with CSOs and civil society more systematic and place greater emphasis on systematic dialogue at partner country level, while also maintaining opportunities for responsive, strategic and less formal ad hoc dialogue. Encourage dialogue between CSOs and members' representatives that are responsible for policy realms other than development co-

operation such as members' foreign policy and private sector investment and trade policies and encourage dialogue between CSOs and partner country governments. Improve the quality and efficiency of dialogue with CSOs by following good practice, including co-ordination of dialogue among members.

- Assess, minimise and monitor the transaction cost burden of members' administrative requirements. Address the administrative burden, for example by shifting to strategic, streamlined requirements; using CSOs' own or co-defined formats and systems; using multi-year funding agreements; adapting requirements to contribution size and risk level; and co-ordinating and harmonising with other members such as through multi-donor pooled funds and other methods. Revisit the 2013 Code of Practice on Donor Harmonisation as a basis for action.
- Work collaboratively with CSOs to define results frameworks and indicators that are most relevant to the initiative at hand, the individuals and communities involved, and the changes (results) that CSOs and the individuals and communities they work with would like to see. Collaborate with CSOs to explore and experiment with results indicators for strengthening a pluralist and independent civil society in partner countries. Apply iterative and adaptive approaches to results management, with greater emphasis on learning to inform programming directions in an adaptive manner while investing in building CSOs' results monitoring and learning capacities.
- Use a mix of methods to support CSOs' accountability in partner countries, recognising this as essential to strengthening civil society and enabling environments. Assess and address how member practices for working with CSOs and civil society may undermine CSOs' legitimacy and accountability at partner country level and work towards ensuring that member practices do no harm to CSOs' partner country-level accountability. Enhance member transparency regarding funding for CSOs so funding is disaggregated by partner country and accessible to partner country stakeholders, using an appropriate level of accessibility so CSOs in sensitive environments are not put at risk.

Action points for the OECD DAC

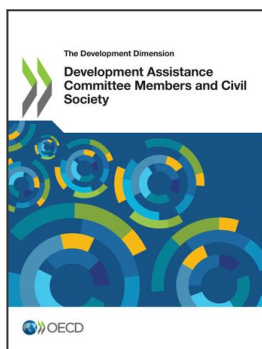
- Develop up-to-date guidance on how members should work with CSOs and civil society or issue a recommendation for greater enforcement potential. Do so in collaboration and consultation with the OECD DAC Community of Practice on Civil Society and the DAC-CSO Reference Group. Apply an iterative, peer learning approach to implementation of the guidance or recommendation.
- Initiate discussion with members on the DAC reporting directives as regards definitions of civil society and CSOs and on the usefulness and accuracy of *to* and *through* coding of financial flows for CSOs.

All told, members appear to be making efforts to work with CSOs in ways that enable the CSOs to maximise their contribution to development. Each member should continuously examine and adapt its policies and practices to ensure development co-operation with CSOs is as effective as possible. Coherence between objectives and members' means of support for and engagement with CSOs is key.

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From:

Development Assistance Committee Members and Civil Society

Access the complete publication at:

<https://doi.org/10.1787/51eb6df1-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2020), "Overview: Enabling civil society through effective development co-operation", in *Development Assistance Committee Members and Civil Society*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/f2aef4ad-en>

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