

Supporting civil society in Africa: Building ‘deep vertical’ and ‘broad horizontal’ partnerships amongst private foundations, NGOs and civil society organisations

Workshop conclusions and recommendations

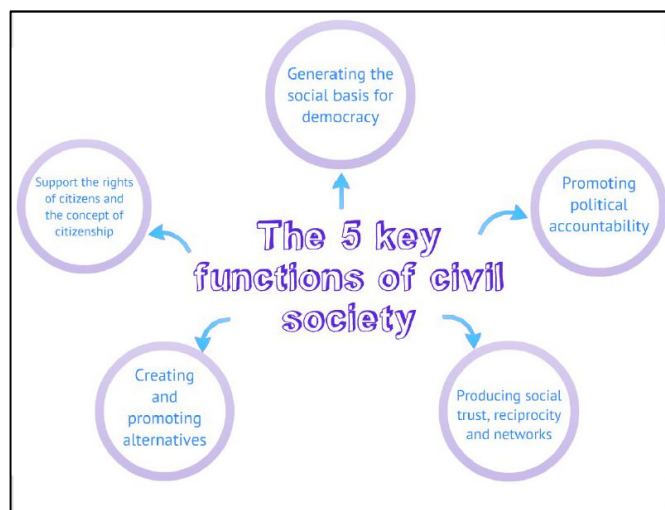
Africa is changing economically, politically and socially, and the needs of civil society to respond to the new dynamics are changing too. As private foundations, NGOs and civil society organisations supporting development work in Africa, we need to re-examine the roles that we play in nurturing the wider competencies of civil society. This note captures lessons and recommendations from a recent workshop on supporting civil society in Africa.

Background

On 17 October 2012, 45 representatives of foundations, trusts, non-governmental organisations, and civil society networks came together in London to explore how we can support the strengthening of civil society in Africa. Co-convened by the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC) and the Association of Charitable Foundations (ACF), and hosted by the Baring Foundation, the workshop examined the changing landscape of civil society and philanthropy in Africa and different approaches to civil society strengthening. Participants came together to share experiences, learn from each other, network, and explore new ideas. Keynote presentations were delivered by Chiku Malunga from CADECO in Malawi and Bhengkosi Moyo of TrustAfrica.

Civil society, capacity building and development in Africa: the changing context

When grant-makers fund the work of civil society organisations (CSOs), what do they perceive as the role of those groups? INTRAC considers that civil society fulfils five functions. For many funders and international NGOs involved in development, the primary engagement they may have with CSOs is through the projects and activities that those organisations deliver with a specific development objective in mind. To what extent do those working with local organisations as partners recognise the wider context within which partners operate, their core needs, and the contributions that CSOs make to social, political and economic development? CSOs are an important component of a healthy society, not just a means to solving an identified development problem; and a healthy society will impact positively on development.



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Many countries in Africa are experiencing unprecedented growth and political change; yet, many countries remain fragile, at risk from growing inequality and economic insecurity. Civil society movements are actively reshaping politics and society on the continent, yet continue to suffer from repression in many contexts. However, a new dynamism is evident within African civil society at Pan-African, regional and local levels. Moreover, African philanthropy and philanthropic support organisations are growing, and many are actively engaging with issues of civil society capacity and governance. These dynamics indicate greater ownership of development agendas by Africans, and the future holds a much more diverse funding landscape on the continent.

There is still much that external actors can do to support these dynamics in Africa. In this environment, we are urged to consider the relevance, legitimacy and sustainability of civil society organisations as part of our development efforts: relevance in terms of addressing the real needs of citizens; legitimacy in terms of how connected CSOs are to the values and priorities of the citizens they purport to represent; and sustainability in terms of the 'staying power' of CSOs to bring about lasting change.

Funders and INGOs working in Africa need to recognise and engage with this change.

Strengthening civil society: a goal, a bonus or off the radar?

Philanthropic foundations and NGOs have been supporting civil society for many years in Africa. A key point of debate was whether strengthening of civil society as a core activity in its own right is a valid and viable objective for funders. For a start, what do we mean by strengthening of civil society? This can mean many things: building up organisational capacity and sustainability through skills, training, material investments, etc. More fundamentally is it about supporting civil society organisations to develop the *competence* to represent themselves and others, through building up stronger institutional capacity to implement activities, to act, to lobby, and to be accountable to those they represent and to those who support them.

For many funders and intermediary organisations capacity building is often *inherent* to a project. It might involve ensuring that the partner has the skills or capacity to fulfil contractual obligations, for example through developing robust monitoring, evaluation and reporting systems. Capacity building in this way might also be seen as an added benefit, but is not the project's central concern.

Other funders focus as much on strengthening the partner organisation as on the development objective. This might be with a view to enabling partners to become sufficiently sustainable to carry on the development work without external support at some point in the future. An approach such as this tends to involve a longer-term strategic view of the partner, ideally – but not always – with a clear exit strategy built in.

Others still might focus their support on partners who already have a strong base. The capacity of organisations to absorb grants, especially when they are large-scale, can be a problem for many funders and some will seek out those organisations that have demonstrable existing capacity, rather than looking to build that capacity. This tends to work against local groups and in favour of large NGOs. Intermediary organisations (either African or international) are important as a way to help develop local capacity and experience.

Key questions which development actors need to consider:

- **What will a funder fund?** How much risk will a funder take? Are they aiming for shorter-term measurable and tangible results, or longer-term systemic change?
- **Who do you partner with?** Do you partner with organisations that have existing capacity – which may be a primary reason for working with them – or do you work with organisations that might need support? What criteria matter most and how do you balance capacity to

deliver against whether your partner is the most relevant organisation for the work in hand, with a longer term trajectory in the country?

- ***Where does capacity building and organisational strengthening fit within your work?*** Is it inherent or explicit?
- ***How do you report on and assess civil society strengthening activities and capacity building?***
- ***Where does advocacy and policy change fit in?***

Building deeper, stronger, vertical relationships

We recognise the complex systems which surround development. Most development activities involve a range of actors, who contribute to the work in different ways, for example bringing skills, networks or resources. There may be multiple layers between monetary input and development activities and outcomes. A typical 'chain' might involve private funder, intermediary international NGO, local partner NGO(s), community-based organisations and individual beneficiaries. Each of the components within this framework brings added value, but also has its own capacity needs, costs and contextual imperatives to deal with.

Our discussions around making these vertical relationships as effective and efficient as possible covered much-trodden ground. Nevertheless, too often we struggle to practice what we preach. If we can become better at implementing good practice in partnership, then the entire framework will be stronger.

To do this, organisations need to:

- ***Know your goals*** and what is required to achieve them, including different types of support needs of partners
- ***Know your partners and their goals and needs***: what questions do you ask of all the organisations within the framework? How do you judge their relevance, legitimacy, accountability? Are you working with the most appropriate partners for the objectives, or the most capable, or the most visible and accessible? What are they asking for that you are not responding to?
- ***Enable good, open, honest and frank communication***: this is often difficult to achieve in reality. It is particularly important to ensure that there are spaces for those at the 'bottom' of the chain to critique and engage openly with those at the 'top'; and for donors to be honest about their role as donors.
- ***Establish realistic reporting systems***: reporting is essential, but it also has to be useful to all parties and attuned to the context.
- ***Building trust***: which requires all the above!

By **listening** and **engaging** more in this way, the chances are that partner organisations will be strengthened and that capacity will be built beyond the confines of the project or funding stream.

Finally, we need to seriously consider whether it is possible to reverse our assumptions. When we introduce the idea of vertical relationships, do we automatically place the funder at the top? True partnership would also build capacity in the other direction, and suggests a learning process from beneficiaries and partners upwards towards the funders.

Supporting broad and effective horizontal interaction

Working better with immediate partners was only one aspect of strengthening civil society. In order for the collective impact of our support and work with civil society organisations to be greater is through understanding “the connective tissue” which surrounds our partners, to quote one workshop participant.

Support for a civil society partner of course does not exist in a vacuum. Many partners receive funding or support from a range of funders; they serve different stake-holders and are connected to different power-holders. They are ultimately enabled and constrained by the context in which they operate. By providing external assistance, funders and NGOs alike affect that fabric, even if this is not explicit within a programme or project. All support to local partners will have a ripple effect.

There are two key dimensions to supporting these more horizontal dimensions of civil society strengthening: firstly, *knowing* the fabric of the society in which partners function; and secondly, *strengthening* the fabric to build wider, broader and deeper impact.

- **Comprehending the context:** what time do you devote to understanding the context in which your partner is embedded? Further, what are the power dynamics at play in the communities within which your partner operates and how does your support affect them? Which networks do your partners engage with? How do they relate to governance and political structures in the country? Who else are they working with (local, national, regional and international bodies) including other civil society actors such as trade unions and informal organisations?
- **Contributing to the wider fabric:** what can you do as a funder or NGO to support horizontal networks, helping to connect your partners to others at different levels? When you as an organisation do not address certain issues, might you work with others collaboratively to support the aspects of work that individually you cannot, to create space, to build capacity, to use your influence, fame and power?

By thinking in this way, we can identify which CSOs are being strengthened and which are not. We can identify the very diverse contributions and needs of civil society, whether that is capacity building for providing niche services to vulnerable populations, support with core costs, political leverage, advocacy networks, expertise, sustainability strategies, etc. We can also engage with the questions of the legitimacy, relevance and sustainability of civil society organisations – and ourselves in engaging in this work.

We recognised that collaboration amongst NGOs, funders and local partners can be complex. It requires compromise, time, space, energy and senior buy-in. But it can also be immensely rewarding, including a way of spreading risk and enhancing voice; and also a way of each component doing what it does best, but collectively enhancing the whole.

‘Sunrise’ not ‘sunset’ thinking: focusing on the ultimate goal

Many of us cannot think about an Africa without aid, but we do need to think about an Africa that does not need aid the way we understand it now. Great change is afoot on the continent, with new forms of giving making their mark, new social movements emerging which exist outside the aid system we are accustomed to and which arguably are having the greatest impact in terms of change, and new strength on the part of many local organisations to demand more and better of their external partners. We need to support what is actually happening in Africa, not what we think is happening or what we think should be happening.

Social development is a common goal that united all those who attended this workshop. We go about it in different ways, with different immediate objectives. The lines between external and local actors, between public and private funding and organisations are very blurred. No golden nuggets were offered, but there was lots of food for thought.

Key points to take away are:

- **Reviewing the value placed on civil society strengthening within your work.** Whether it is implicit or explicit, we urge everyone to think about whom they are working with and how they understand and respond to the broad needs of their partners. If we are serious about development, we also need to be thinking about building up strong organisations that can respond to the needs of people in a sustainable way not just for today but also for tomorrow.
- **Partnership beyond aid and beyond the project.** We need to place partners and beneficiaries at the centre of our work. We urge you to think long-term, think about ownership, think about what more you can do to support your partners, for example through networking them with others or in collaboration with others, and think about aid exit – is there life in your partnership beyond the project, are you supporting your partners to become self-sustaining?
- **Engaging with new intermediary organisations, new philanthropists, new civil society networks in Africa.** How do you engage with the emerging groups which are supporting African development from within the continent?
- **From grant-giver to change agent?** As a philanthropic organisation where do you sit on the [Funders Conundrum](#) spectrums?
- **From impact to added value.** We need practical, relevant and useful systems for accountability. Can we also think beyond the direct impact of our work to the value that we add to the much bigger picture? That includes rethinking the legitimacy of ourselves and our partners to act on behalf of the ultimate beneficiaries of our work.

By strengthening civil society in Africa as a goal or as a component of our work, we can all work together towards building organisations and systems that can bring about real and lasting social, economic and political change in Africa. This is not about focusing on the end of partnerships when those we support no longer need us, but about assisting African organisations to take ownership of their own future. As one break-out group from the workshop put it, having a long-term view with a good exit strategy in mind makes for good practice; but the end of funding should not be seen as the ‘sunset’ of a relationship but as the ‘sunrise’ of more sustainable development.

Resources and further information

INTRAC resources on NGOs and private funders in international development:

www.intrac.org/pages/en/aid-architecture-trends.html

INTRAC resources on civil society strengthening:

www.intrac.org/resources.php?type=&format=1&action=

TrustAfrica resources: www.trustafrica.org

African Grant Makers Network: www.africangrantmakersnetwork.org/about-agn/

A Funder Conundrum: www.theworkcontinues.org/page.asp?id=1791

Baring Foundation resources: www.baringfoundation.org.uk

Baring Foundation Learning from international development report:

www.baringfoundation.org.uk/IntDevReport.pdf

Bellagio Initiative: www.bellagioinitiative.org