

Realising the Potential of Civil Society-led South-South Development Cooperation

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) from the BRICS countries and Mexico are leading a huge range of South-South Development Cooperation (SSDC) initiatives. New research shows how these initiatives are promoting social accountability, supporting post-disaster reconstruction and effectively sharing rural and urban development knowledge. Given this experience and expertise, these organisations have a significant role to play in the post-2015 development cooperation landscape as envisaged by the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC) and other global policy initiatives. However, in order to realise this potential, more systematic documentation of the evidence on the positive impacts of their SSDC efforts is required as well as greater recognition by traditional donors, rising power country governments and fora such as the GPEDC of the important role that these organisations can play in shaping a more global approach to international development policy and practice.

The changing nature of global partnerships and development cooperation

The GPEDC, which held its first High-Level Meeting in Mexico City in April 2014, is a 'forum for shared advice, shared learning and shared action' on development cooperation. It brings together governments, the private sector, civil society and others. It emerged from the November 2011 Busan conference, as the result of an effort to promote dialogue not only between state and non-state actors and aid donors and recipients, but also between wealthier aid-donor nations and the big middle-income countries that are playing an increasingly important role as providers of SSDC.

The main focus of SSDC is the sharing of technology, approaches and expertise deriving from provider countries' efforts to tackle their own development challenges. A sub-group of middle-income countries – the

BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), Mexico, Indonesia and Turkey – have emerged as rising powers in international development. Their contribution to effective development cooperation through SSDC is distinctive because they have acquired a critical mass of capacity and growing international influence while domestically still facing challenges in overcoming entrenched poverty and inequality that are requiring them to develop innovative responses.

To date, the growing interest in these countries' role in international development – and in bringing them into the GPEDC and other global development policy initiatives – has mostly focused on government-to-government development cooperation activities. This risks ignoring the important role played by CSOs – as well as other actors such as businesses and thinktanks – in shaping these countries' contributions to international development.

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CSOs as innovators and providers of development cooperation

A series of case studies carried out by IDS, Articulação SUL, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) and Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) in 2014, demonstrated some of the proactive international roles played by CSOs from middle-income countries:

1. **Brazil, Mozambique and South Africa:** a native seed bank project that promotes the exchange of experiences between family farmers, technicians and rural leaders. Led by a group of social movements and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the project is supported by the Brazilian government, and aims to build capacity and facilitate knowledge sharing to promote food sovereignty.
2. **Mexico and Haiti:** a post-disaster reconstruction and long-term development project, established following the 2010 earthquake after a dialogue between Haitian NGOs and a multi-stakeholder group of Mexican CSOs, government departments and private-sector actors. A key focus of the activities has been on strengthening Haiti's agriculture and rural economic development via farmer-to-farmer exchanges with Mexico.
3. **India, Bangladesh and Cambodia:** a civic engagement and local governance project with CSOs, drawing on CSO experience of influencing local government reform and promoting social accountability in India since the 1990s. This initiative has involved training and mentoring, to introduce innovative social accountability tools and ensure their take-up by a range of local stakeholders.
4. **India and South Africa:** the creation of a network of community-based organisations supporting housing rights through horizontal exchanges. The project works with groups of the urban poor to share and adapt experiences of mobilisation, advocacy and women's leadership while addressing practical needs through microfinance services.

CSO-led SSDC and the Busan Principles

A historically-grounded principle of solidarity has been central to sustaining civil society-led SSDC projects over time. This principle goes alongside the importance attached by participating CSOs to working in ways that are more flexible than traditional North-South donor modalities, avoiding intrusive conditions and creating new space for innovation.

The SSDC activities of CSOs from middle-income 'rising power' countries could be a valuable source of learning on how to put into practice the GPEDC's **Busan Principles** of ownership, results, partnership, transparency and mutual accountability:

- **Ownership and results:** by working with both government and grass-roots organisations and promoting a more participatory approach that prioritises engagement with grass-roots groups, they have achieved results that were a good fit with local priorities, even if these were not always well-documented. By maintaining dialogue with government they have helped to broaden ownership and thus ensure better prospects for sustainability of these results.
- **Inclusive partnerships:** through working together to build relationships, establish trust and find a common approach. Also, by including a wide range of community groups as partners, and maintaining an explicit

focus on gender that ensured attention to women's perspectives and priorities.

- **Transparency and mutual accountability:** by working together to hold governments to account and promote more transparent public decision-making, emphasising transparency and mutual accountability in their own South-South relationships.

Challenges for civil society in SSDC

CSO-led South-South Development Cooperation initiatives face a number of challenges that will need to be overcome if they are to achieve greater scale, impact and sustainability.

Generating evidence and ensuring visibility

Civil society-led SSDC initiatives remain relatively little-known and under-analysed within debates on the future of development cooperation. In part, this is due to the state-centric approach taken by rising power governments in promoting their South-South Development Cooperation activities. Governments who are now keen to share their development innovations with the world tend not to recognise the role that civil society may have played in generating them. This may be because many of these innovations, including India's democratic decentralisation reforms and Brazil's social protection policies, had their origins in rights struggles in which

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CSOs were initially challenging rather than defending the government, until policy shifted to incorporate campaigners' ideas. In the international arena, the fact that official South-South discourse focuses on government-to-government relationships tends to obscure the important potential role of civil society in effective SSDC.

Many CSOs lack information systems that can ensure their international initiatives are documented systematically. Since they often attach more importance to long-term political solidarity than immediately-measurable impact, documentation of these initiatives' concrete short-term achievements is often irregular, and there are few robust evaluations.

Difficult CSO-state relations

The reluctance of governments to recognise the value of civil society-led SSDC initiatives is often a reflection of wider difficulties in CSO-state engagement within countries. In many rising power countries the legal frameworks and policy contexts for such engagement are highly restrictive, as shown by their scores in the global Enabling Environment Index (EEI) developed by CIVICUS: the World Alliance for Citizen Participation. Even where the context has historically been more favourable, CSOs complain of increasingly adverse political and regulatory environments.

Since the rising powers see development cooperation as part of foreign policy – a sensitive area where there tends to be limited dialogue between government and CSOs – engaging civil society in development cooperation policy debate is inherently difficult. However, there are some encouraging examples of rising power country governments creating space for multi-stakeholder dialogue.

Changing funding environment for CSOs

Civil society-led SSDC has often benefited from international foundation or NGO funding that has given it a degree of autonomy from government or business influences, ensuring the scope to experiment and build horizontal solidarity-based relationships. Flows of such funding are shrinking rapidly, at the same time as traditional donors are reducing (and in some cases ending) their bilateral programmes in middle-income countries.

Faced with this resource squeeze, CSOs have developed varied sources and forms of funding for their SSDC initiatives. The initiatives analysed in the case studies were funded by a mix of domestic funds raised from citizens, government grants, triangular cooperation

Emerging spaces for dialogue

India has a forum for policy debate, launched in 2013, which comprises government departments, research institutions and CSOs. Since its launch, the Forum for Indian Development Cooperation (FIDC) has supported data collection around CSO development cooperation activities, and hosted a number of wide-ranging debates to which civil society has been able to make a significant contribution. **Mexico** has made substantial efforts to institutionalise policy dialogue with civil society, creating national participatory spaces in which Mexican CSOs engage with Mexican authorities, bilateral dialogues and consultation processes between CSOs from Mexico and partner countries and governments, and ad hoc multilateral mechanisms created during major events hosted by the country (including the April 2014 High-Level Meeting of the GPEDC). In **Brazil**, despite limited overall progress in formalising dialogue with civil society on development cooperation policy, the General Secretariat of the Presidency has ensured that informal dialogue channels are kept open, and funded some CSO-led SSDC activities.

(involving funds from traditional donor countries and multilateral organisations) and mobilisation of resources from the beneficiary population via microfinance initiatives.

One of the case studies examined the experience of Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI), which grew out of India-South Africa civil society collaboration. SDI's experience shows that organisations can use innovative microfinance initiatives to generate funding and mobilise the resources of the poor themselves within their countries. However, this case study also showed that larger-scale external funding remained essential to promote effective sharing of these innovative models via transnational cooperation.

Despite the growing investment in SSDC by middle-income country governments, very few have funding windows through which regular support can be provided to civil society-led initiatives. In addition to the absence of appropriate budget lines, domestic legal frameworks are often restrictive, and problems can be compounded by bureaucratic obstacles and/or political mistrust.

Poor alignment between CSO-led SSDC and existing global policy agendas

CSO leaders interviewed during the research complained of restrictive participation criteria and privileging of business rather than civil society voices in big events like the Mexico City High-Level Meeting. Nevertheless, civil society has won substantial recognition from the GPEDC – but this recognition has mostly

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centred on issues of aid transparency and accountability and on delivery of public services by non-state actors, and not on CSOs' roles as development innovators and cooperation providers in their own right.

Existing approaches have also tended to follow a North/South, donor/recipient binary model. This emphasises the need for Southern NGOs to participate in development processes in their own countries, and for Northern NGOs to act as responsible donors in countries of the South. CSO-led SSDC does not fit this binary model, as it involves Southern NGOs who do not see themselves as donors but who are active in development

cooperation with other Southern countries.

This is further complicated by the fact that the historic donor/recipient dynamic between Northern-based international NGOs and middle-income country CSOs has been fraught with power inequalities, posing challenges for global civil society fora such as the post-Busan CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE). Such fora sometimes struggle to ensure that their advocacy agendas reflect the specific challenges faced by Southern-based CSOs who are providing development cooperation beyond the borders of their home countries.

Policy implications

- **Civil society organisations from middle-income countries** need to generate more evidence on how their SSDC-led initiatives are making a difference, including more systematic process documentation and participatory evaluation of short-term results as well as longer-term catalytic effects.
- **The development research community** needs to work with middle-income country CSOs to produce a robust evidence base on the role of CSO-led SSDC, with appropriate methodologies for capturing the complex longer-term impacts that solidarity-based initiatives can have on communities, organisations and policies.
- **Traditional donors** need to consider replacement funding mechanisms to ensure that middle-income country CSOs are able to continue both triggering innovation domestically and sharing innovation internationally.
- **Rising power country governments** need to recognise the value that CSOs can add to the quality and impact of their South-South Development Cooperation activities. This includes acknowledging civil society's contributions to domestic policy innovations, and learning from fellow rising powers who have established funding mechanisms and institutionalised spaces for policy dialogue on international development cooperation.
- **Global civil society fora** like the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) need to move beyond North/South and donor/recipient binaries to reflect the multiple roles played by CSOs from middle-income countries. There is an opportunity for CPDE's Working Group on South-South Cooperation to lead the way by highlighting the roles played by Southern CSOs in providing development cooperation themselves, as well as in demanding accountability from governments and businesses.
- **The Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation** needs to become an enabling platform for CSO-led SSDC to fulfil its potential as a key part of the 'how' of delivering the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals. This includes creating more multi-stakeholder learning opportunities with CSOs who are involved in SSDC in different regions and sectors, and promoting dialogue on enhanced funding mechanisms for civil society-led development cooperation.



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Further reading

Case study reports from the IDS/PRIA/Articulação SUL 'CSO-led South-South Cooperation' project can be downloaded from www.cso-ssc.org

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Credits

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