



# Innovation, solidarity and South-South learning

## The role of civil society from middle-income countries in effective development cooperation

Civil society organisations (CSOs) from middle-income countries can play multiple strategically important roles in effective development cooperation. Beyond demanding transparency and accountability around the aid that their own countries still receive, they can add significant value to development cooperation provided to other countries. They have been key actors – alongside government and businesses – in developing innovative practices which have immense potential to contribute to the global struggle against poverty. In some cases, they have considerable experience of sharing these practices and influencing their integration into policies internationally as well as at home.

However, these key development cooperation roles remain little-understood, and their results are often poorly-documented. An evidence-base on the value added of civil society-led initiatives is starting to emerge, but meanwhile the decline in aid flows to middle-income countries is putting at risk the capacity of those countries' civil society organisations

to continue innovating. Government-led South-South Cooperation programmes are growing, but often fail to capitalise on the potential for sharing the lessons from civil society experiences.

This briefing aims to highlight the contribution of civil society organisations to the roles which middle-income countries play not just as recipients of aid, but also as innovators and providers of development cooperation. It draws on a review of available literature, on the evidence from the BRICS countries and Mexico gathered by the IDS Rising Powers in International Development programme and on four case studies. These case studies illustrate the role of civil society organisations in cooperation across a range of contexts, including fragile and post-disaster situations, as well as cooperation between middle- and low-income countries. They examine civil society organisations' international roles in providing services, promoting social accountability, supporting post-disaster reconstruction and sharing rural and urban development knowledge that derives from their own domestic experiences.

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## Summary of case studies

Four cases were selected to ensure coverage of a range of middle-income development cooperation provider countries, regions, actors and sectors:



**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 civil society organisations, 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.



**India, Bangladesh and Cambodia:** a civic engagement and local governance project with civil society organisations, drawing on CSO experience of influencing local governance 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 takeup by a range of local stakeholders.



**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 mobilization, advocacy and women's leadership while addressing practical needs through microfinance services.



**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 NGOs, the project is supported by the Brazilian government, and aims to build capacity and facilitate knowledge sharing to promote food sovereignty.

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## Civil society organisations in South-South development cooperation

South-South Development Cooperation (SSDC) is a broad framework for collaboration involving two or more developing countries sharing knowledge, skills and resources to achieve improved development outcomes. Trade, investment, debt relief and humanitarian assistance are all often counted as part of SSDC, but its main focus is the sharing of technology, expertise and solutions deriving from provider countries' efforts to tackle their own development challenges.

A sub-group of middle-income countries – including the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) as well as other key countries such as Mexico, Turkey and Indonesia – have become 'rising powers' in international development. They are uniquely placed to contribute to effective development cooperation because they have acquired a critical mass of capacity and growing international influence while still struggling to overcome entrenched problems of poverty and inequality at home. This means that they have both a strong incentive to continue seeking innovative responses to development challenges and the resources to develop these responses and share them with other countries through SSDC.

Most SSDC from middle-income countries is provided by national governments, but other actors

including local governments, businesses, academic institutions and civil society organisations often play a key role either in coordination with government or via their own initiatives. Civil society organisations, such as NGOs and social movements, have been responsible for some of the most innovative SSDC initiatives. However, the existing evidence base on the scope and results of these initiatives is very limited, as reporting is patchy and there are few robust evaluations.

Civil society is very diverse, and often lacks coordination, but our research suggests that some trends and common elements can be observed in civil society-led initiatives. For example, CSOs from middle-income countries often have experience of collaborating with organisations from other parts of the Global South which began long before their countries became 'rising powers'. These collaborations are usually based on values of solidarity among communities facing similar problems in different countries, and often developed out of initial links facilitated by faith-based organisations or international NGOs.

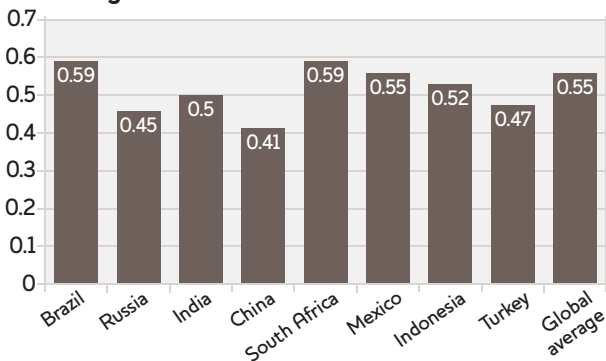
“CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS OFTEN PLAY A KEY ROLE IN COORDINATION WITH GOVERNMENTS VIA THEIR OWN INITIATIVES.”

# The enabling environment for civil society in middle-income countries

The knowledge, skills and expertise developed by CSOs in addressing entrenched deprivation, poverty, exclusion, inequality, conflict, and governance and accountability challenges in their own contexts has given them the legitimacy to engage in development cooperation with other developing countries. However, the 'official' discourse on SSDC, which focuses on government-to-government relationships, often fails to recognise the roles that civil society has been playing and the potential for CSOs to contribute to enhancing the effectiveness of SSDC.

The reluctance of governments to recognise the role of civil society in SSDC is often a reflection of wider difficulties for CSO-state engagement. Legal frameworks and policy contexts in most middle-income countries are challenging, with CSOs in many of these countries citing an increasingly restrictive regulatory environment. The Enabling Environment Index (EEI), a global composite index developed by CIVICUS, the World Alliance for Citizen Participation, shows that restrictive conditions are common in many 'rising power' countries. As the figure below shows, India, China, Turkey, Russia and Indonesia all score below the global average in the EEI, with Mexico, South Africa and Brazil scoring marginally higher than the global average.

## Enabling environment index



Source: authors' compilation using data from CIVICUS 2013.

Even in countries which score relatively well, however, civil society engagement in policy debates around SSDC can be problematic, as development cooperation is generally classified as part of foreign policy, an area where governments tend to be much less open to dialogue with CSOs. Brazil has a specific department within the Presidency that is tasked with promoting dialogue with civil society, but the government has thus far resisted demands to put this dialogue on a more formal footing where development cooperation policy is concerned. Mexico, by contrast, has made more substantial efforts to institutionalise policy dialogue with civil society.

## Civil society participation in Mexican development cooperation policy

The Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and more recently the Mexican Agency for International Development Cooperation (Agencia Mexicana de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo, AMEXCID), created in 2011, have made notable efforts to strengthen the enabling environment for civil society engagement in Mexico's SSDC. The Ministry has promoted at least three different types of participatory initiative in which international development cooperation-related issues are discussed:

- i) national participatory spaces in which Mexican CSOs engage with Mexican authorities;
- ii) bilateral dialogues and consultation processes between civil society organisations from Mexico and other countries and governments, and
- iii) multilateral ad-hoc mechanisms created during major international fora which have taken place in Mexico, such as the June 2012 meeting of the G20 and the April 2014 High-Level Meeting of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation.

AMEXCID, in particular, has also created 5 technical councils for academic experts on development cooperation, local governments, private sector, a council for civil society and a general advisory council. Within the Civil Society Technical Council 7 CSOs are represented: 4 INGOs and 3 NGOs. This is a consultative body which is responsible for advising AMEXCID on all the cooperation schemes the agency promotes, but the final say rests with AMEXCID.

Mexican CSOs recognize the value of working together with the Mexican government in all of these spaces, seeing them as an opportunity for participants to think collectively and find common solutions.

While the environment for civil society engagement varies across the middle-income countries, to a greater or lesser extent their CSOs all face the challenges which derive from operating within a country that is shifting from being an aid recipient to a partner in development cooperation. Their traditional Northern funding base is shrinking, at the same time as the development footprint of their governments and businesses in other countries is growing rapidly. This often leads to demands for solidarity in challenging other development cooperation activities in the same country, as in the Brazil-Mozambique case where Mozambican peasant movements sought support from Brazilian CSOs in criticising an agricultural development programme supported by the Brazilian government. This leaves civil society organisations from middle-income countries facing the challenge of balancing competing demands in order to maintain relevance.

# Stakeholder coordination and dialogue

Civil society-led SSDC generally originates in projects which are independent of government initiatives or business investments. This brings benefits such as freedom to experiment and scope to build horizontal solidarity relationships. However, for such projects to achieve a sustainable impact there needs to be effective collaboration with a number of key stakeholders, including government agencies.

The research highlights the importance of coordination between civil society and the government, in both the provider and receiver country. The level of participation of local, regional and national government institutions has varied depending on the nature of the initiative, with some including extensive participation of various ministries, while others struggled to achieve any coordination with government. This is particularly challenging in post-disaster situations, where (as the Mexico-Haiti CSO initiative found) the absence of a functioning state can significantly reduce the effectiveness and sustainability of an initiative.

Civil society-led SSDC initiatives rarely coordinate their activities with other international NGOs and donors operating in the country to ensure harmonization and avoid duplication. This is often because their priorities are different, as they begin from a solidarity impulse rather than from an aid programming approach. There may also be suspicion of coordination fora that are seen as dominated by traditional Northern donor agendas. In the case of the Mexico-Haiti reconstruction project, there was an additional problem of coordination with private-sector initiatives.

Space for multi-stakeholder dialogue at the provider country level is also an important ingredient in sustainable civil society-led SSDC initiatives. In India, for example, a Forum for Indian Development Cooperation (FIDC) has been set up as a multi-stakeholder body including government departments, research institutions and civil society organisations. Launched in 2013, FIDC has supported data collection on the development cooperation activities of Indian CSOs, and hosted a number of wide-ranging debates. Although these debates are often dominated by government perspectives, FIDC provides an innovative forum where civil society is able to contribute to discussions on trends, challenges and opportunities for SSDC.

As well as policy dialogue, civil society-led SSDC needs a positive funding environment to achieve sustainable impact. Civil society in middle-income countries has been compelled to consider new,

alternative sources of funding, as traditional donors are reducing (and in some cases ending) their bilateral funding. 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. Domestic legal frameworks are often restrictive, and problems can be compounded by bureaucratic obstacles and/or political mistrust. As a result, CSOs have developed varied sources and forms of funding for their SSDC initiatives.

“MULTI-STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUE IS AN IMPORTANT INGREDIENT IN SUSTAINABLE CIVIL SOCIETY-LED INITIATIVES.”

## Funding

The varied nature of civil society-led SSDC is also reflected in the range of funding sources and financial models in different projects. This is illustrated in our case studies:

- **Domestic funds raised from citizens of the middle-income provider country.** The Mexico-Haiti reconstruction project was entirely funded by private citizen donations to a faith-based organisation in Mexico, with no contributions from traditional donors.
- **Domestic funds from a middle-income country government.** The Government of Brazil, through the Brazilian Cooperation Agency (ABC), is the sole funder of the civil society-led seed banks project linking Brazil with Southern Africa.
- **Triangular cooperation, involving funds from traditional donor countries and multilateral organisations,** facilitating SSDC initiatives through the provision of funding to implementing partners. This was the model of the social accountability project linking India, Cambodia and Bangladesh.
- **Mobilisation of resources from the beneficiary population via microfinance initiatives, combined with traditional donor funding for NGO support,** as in the case of the India-South Africa collaboration which gave rise to a transnational housing rights network.

The case studies illustrate the diversity of financial models for cooperation projects in MICs. The Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) model, which grew out of India-South Africa civil society collaboration, shows that organisations can use innovative microfinance initiatives to generate funding and mobilise the resources of the poor themselves within their countries. However, transnational cooperation also needs larger-scale alternative or external funding, if it is to promote effective sharing of innovative models.

# The challenge of building more horizontal relations with the north

**N**orthern-based international NGOs and civil society organisations from middle-income countries have a long history of relationships shaped by a provider-recipient dynamic. The power inequalities inherent in this dynamic have left a legacy which can complicate relations between these two groups of actors, as CSOs from middle-income countries seek to establish an influential role in SSDC. International NGOs believe they still have valuable expertise and relevance, which gives them the credentials to continue to operate as a partner in development cooperation. This creates pressure for Northern- and Southern-based civil society actors to find innovative forms of collaboration to respond to the changing political context.

Global CSO alliances such as the post-Busan CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) face the challenge of reflecting the changing roles and power dynamics between Northern- and Southern-based development NGOs. Previously in development effectiveness debates the focus has been on how the former (framed as organisations based in provider countries) should operate internationally, and how the latter (framed as organisations based in recipient countries) should operate domestically. This is a framing which fails to address the particular challenges facing CSOs which originate from middle-income countries that are becoming globally influential and starting to shape the development pathways of poorer countries, while themselves still having high levels of poverty and inequality. While pre-Busan civil society debates produced important frameworks for effective CSO development cooperation (such as the Istanbul Principles), in the post-Busan period these may need to be reassessed and updated to reflect the specific roles of Southern-based NGOs in the provision of development cooperation beyond the borders of their home countries.

As a contribution to this process, the case study research for this project looked for evidence of the Busan principles being applied in practice in civil society-led South-South Cooperation.

“PRINCIPLES OF SOLIDARITY ARE CENTRAL TO SUSTAINING CIVIL SOCIETY-LED SSDC PROJECTS OVER TIME.”

## Putting Busan principles into practice

Civil society initiatives can complement the development cooperation practices of government or business actors in ways which strengthen the Busan principles. Some examples from our case study research of how civil society is putting the Busan principles into practice are:

### Ownership and Results

- Stakeholders involved in the Mexico-Haiti case study recognised that an important added value which civil society brought to the project was working with grassroots organisations and promoting a participatory approach. This helped to create greater ownership, and thus better prospects for sustainability of the initiative’s results, in comparison to other post-disaster reconstruction projects.

### Inclusive Partnerships

- The Brazil-Southern Africa seed bank project and the Shack/Slum-Dwellers International initiative both evolved over several years as partners worked together to build relationships, establish trust and find a common approach. An explicit focus on gender also ensured that women’s perspectives and priorities helped to shape the content of the initiative.

### Transparency and Accountability

- Mutual accountability is an important part of the more horizontal relationships which SSDC seeks to promote, and the mutual learning among CSOs can also help strengthen their ability to hold their own governments to account (as in the India-Bangladesh-Cambodia case). However, our case studies show there is still a lot of work to be done to establish broader transparency for civil society led-SSDC initiatives themselves, due not least to the absence of institutionalised information systems.

Existing transparency and accountability mechanisms in development cooperation have also been based on a North-South aid and donor-recipient paradigm, and are difficult to apply to SSDC. Blurred lines between different forms of development assistance, private investment and trade negotiations make identifying, monitoring, and holding stakeholders accountable very difficult for civil society. With their role in SSDC, civil society organisations are also responsible for strengthening their own practices in order to be a credible development cooperation actor. However, there is currently a significant gap between the level of information available on the nature of CSO engagement in South-South development cooperation and the level that is required to ensure it can be part of a balanced, evidence-based global policy debate on the actual and potential contribution of SSDC to effective development cooperation.



## Principles and mechanisms of civil society-led SSDC: lessons from the case studies

Just as official South-South Cooperation emphasises technical cooperation and knowledge-sharing, civil society-led SSDC initiatives tend to focus on exchange of experiences, the difference being that this exchange takes place between non-governmental organisations, often including community-based groups and social movements. In some cases (such as the India-Bangladesh-Cambodia example), local government officials are also involved. The activities involved in our four case studies included:

- peer-to-peer strategic dialogue
- learning exchange visits
- capacity building training sessions
- design and application of tools and methods
- ongoing mentoring and coaching of project participants

Although the cases vary greatly in scale, setting and timeframe, it is possible to draw out some common themes which reflect the principles that underpin South-South Cooperation more broadly.

Principles of solidarity are central to sustaining civil society-led SSDC projects over time. All our case studies emphasise the importance of building trust over a longer period, allowing time for familiarisation and 'cultural translation'. Sometimes specific technical SSDC activities happened after more political solidarity visits had been taking place for decades. Where partners have a shared political commitment, this can accelerate trust-building as an essential foundation to a successful project. In many civil society-led SSDC initiatives, national actors who have shared values and ideology are linked up through transnational networks, which may be faith-based or class-based. A further, important consequence of this ideological solidarity is that it increases the potential sustainability of the project, as rapid turnover is less likely in social movements than when working with government officials.

“PRINCIPLES OF SOLIDARITY ARE CENTRAL TO SUSTAINING CIVIL SOCIETY-LED SSDC PROJECTS.”



**Given solidarity and trust between cooperation partners, more focused civil society-led SSDC projects can also lead to mobilisation and broader coalitions for common causes.**

The ability to link local realities and challenges to global issues creates a sense of political solidarity between cooperation partners. For example, the movements involved in the seed bank project came to see it as part of a broader struggle against agribusiness, as the relationship with other movements helped them to gain a better understanding of the political aspects of food sovereignty. This, in turn, led them to question some Brazilian government development cooperation projects in Mozambique.

**Civil society-led SSDC aspires to be more flexible and adaptable than traditional North-South donor modalities, avoiding intrusive conditions and creating space for innovation.**

Many CSOs active in SSDC, including PRIA and SDI, have developed the approaches that they are now seeking to share over many years of experimentation and learning in their countries of origin. They therefore tend to understand that blueprint approaches are often inappropriate, and try to maintain flexibility and integrate learning into their cooperation activities so as to continue to support innovation.

**A multi-stakeholder approach is essential to ensure the sustainability of civil society-led SSDC.**

Ownership of initiatives among the communities involved is generally broader than is the case for government-to-government SSDC, but CSOs face their own challenges of sustainability. Civil society actors may drive transnational cooperation initiatives, but a range of stakeholders – national government, traditional donors, private sector – need to be involved to make the initiative sustainable and scalable. Whilst the level of government involvement in implementation varies across projects, government buy-in is essential for sustaining project success.

**New methods of measuring the impact of SSDC need to be explored to capture the complex effects of civil society-led transnational initiatives.**

The immediate results of civil society-led SSDC can often seem quite limited, but there is evidence that they contribute to broader and longer-term change by shifting attitudes and catalysing movements, which in turn can secure changes in policy with significant impact on development outcomes. The development of appropriate strategies for identifying these effects could help to secure an appropriate level of visibility for the contribution of civil society-led SSDC to effective development cooperation.

**Further Reading**

For further reading and resources relating to this project, visit [www.cso-ssc.org](http://www.cso-ssc.org)

**Credits**

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