Briefing Note 1 | Learning Journey on Working with Civil Society

What are the strengths and weaknesses of INGOs delivering development outcomes?

Overview

International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) differ from other typical Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in terms of geographic reach, size and scale, access to funds, and development roles (Morton, n.d.). INGOS are often better positioned to influence domestic and international policy (Kreienkamp, 2017; Cooper, 2018; Morton, n.d.) However, they also have limitations which mean they do not always provide the most appropriate support, or in some cases their actions have adverse consequences (Green, 2017; Jayawickrama and McCullagh, 2009; Cooper, 2018; Altahir, 2013).

Large INGOs are more likely to gain access to local government officials to influence decision making, thereby playing a critical role in the development of global humanitarian norms. They are often more able to offer legitimacy to local issues, or bring crises in developing countries to the attention of the Northern citizens and governments. However, INGOs are not always best positioned to lead on national programmes because of their limited inside understanding of the context. In many cases, it may be better to have a national partner leading, with INGOs in support roles.

Another challenge is that funding models of INGOs are sometimes out of sync with their mission statements and objectives, time-sensitive, and looking for quick results rather than longer term institutional strengthening. Their independence can lead to poor accountability and competition between actors, which results in coordination challenges and power imbalances.

While INGOs continue to play a role in development as many Southern CSOs depend on INGOs to fund their development efforts, new models and forms of partnership streamlining, reducing the data burden, and relooking at finance flows need to all play a part in reimagining their future.

Reading time:

3–5 minutes

Who is this for:

FCDO advisors and programme managers working with INGOs and in the Civil Society space; other stakeholders with interest in or engagement with civil society.

What you can find:

- The current context
- Key strengths and weaknesses of INGOs
- Emerging issues for consideration

The current context

The world has changed significantly since the INGO model first rose to prominence, with massive recent shifts through the pandemic, explosions in technology leading to new ways of doing business, emerging challenges in the ability of INGOs to safeguard, the climate crisis, and the shifts in human rights challenges facing civil society as a whole. Some INGOs have made efforts to adapt, looking to localise and decolonise though #ShiftthePower movement, as well as more direct and democratic resourcing and decentralised and federal structures. The 'old model' of INGOs being led by the Global North is shifting, with new regional and Southern models emerging, in both small and large organisations.

Key strengths and weaknesses of INGOs

STRENGTHS

- **Raising development financing:** enlisting a growing number of donors and vocal supporters to view poverty as a moral issue in the North. Aid from large INGOs covers a bigger portion of funding directed at CSOs in developing countries. INGOs can raise significant development financing, and then work through partnerships to distribute this to CSOs.
- **Sharing expertise and knowledge:** INGOs also have a wealth of non-financial resources, such as expert knowledge. This is key in programme delivery and policy influence research (E.g., gender equity and local ownership becoming foundations of good development practice via INGOs). INGOs also have accumulated a large pool of knowledge and experience across various geographic spaces, and have the scope to implement them and conduct research.
- **Technical Expertise:** INGOs have technical skills which mean that they can earn donors' trust. This includes management skills, report writing skills, knowledge transfer, technical assistance, Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E), and digital/ e-tools.
- **Influencing development policy:** INGOs are more involved in political processes, transnational policymaking, and global governance. Large INGOs are more likely than small/ local CSOs to have access to local government officials and may have more influence over decision making.

WEAKNESSES

- **Lack of coordination** with other development actors may occur, particularly in countries with repressive regimes and narrow civic space.
- **Northern offices of INGOs wield disproportionate power** while Southern offices are not given sufficient voice and representation. Thus, the long-term presence of INGOs in developing countries could have adverse effects on local CSOs.
- **Unsuitable funding models:** Funding may be out of sync with their mission statements and objectives. Funding for projects is only short-term, despite strong advocacy efforts for longer term funding. Due to this, funds may be diverted away from end users.
- **Too much operational subcontracting and delegation:** There are trends of INGOs developing short-term partnerships and subcontracting local NGOs for projects rather than establishing long-term partnerships.
- **Centralised M&E:** INGOs tend to adopt approaches to monitoring, evaluating, and reporting that are centralised rather than contextualised, and place large and unnecessary data burdens on local partners.
- **Difficult working environment:** INGOs have faced hostile and restrictive environments in some partner countries. The closure of civil society spaces has been broadly linked to the rise of populism and repressive governments.

BOX 1

The RINGO Project

https://rightscolab.org/ringo

The RINGO Project is a current initiative (2020 – 2022) involving INGOs, Southern partners and researchers exploring power and structural challenges in the civil society system. The project investigates what systemic change is needed to 'reimagine' INGOs and develop tools and recommendations for doing this. Based on a survey of over 600 national and local CSOs in Global South, results confirm power imbalances, and show that INGOs are perceived to have Western models, and promote transactional relationships. It was evident that local and national CSOs want INGOs to act as co-implementers and facilitators of projects and programmes, using equitable practices.

Initial recommendations from RINGO

- Accountability must be contextualised
- INGOs need to re-examine frameworks and benchmarks
- Implementation should not be imposed, but collaborative
- It is very important to have local engagements
- Racism and colonialism have been key obstacles and blocks identified in the system. Organisations are increasingly reaching out in the sector asking for advice in how to decolonise their spaces

Emerging issues for consideration

From a Northern donor government perspective, there is a major role for INGOs to play in shaping public narratives around development in their home countries, and in moving the narrative away from the idea of charity to a more sophisticated approach. Language is more important than mere semantics, as it influences perceptions and assumptions. The way categories of CSOs are defined determine the options which are available to them. Currently, INGOs set the tone, language, and debate around what development is, and this structure is often forced onto local CSOs, limiting imagination in terms of how new systems can be organised.

International development government departments, such as the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) in the United Kingdom, are more than just donors: like other develop corporations, they have the potential to influence broader policy change.

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SUGGESTED CIATION
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