

Evaluating efficacy when funding CSOs promoting democracy and open societies

Overview

- > It is generally agreed that democracies with a more entrenched civil society are associated with a 68% reduction in the hazard of democratic breakdown (Bernhard et al., 2020).
- > However, there is no 'automatic flow' from Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to liberal democratic values and practices. The causal relationship is dependent on the nature of civil society in the particular context, in addition to other dynamic and context-specific factors.
- > [Some studies](#) show that a highly mobilised civil society can contribute to democratic regression where their demands cannot be effectively channelled by the party system.
- > There is no clear consensus on how to evaluate Value for Money (VfM) in terms of funding democratic freedom. Methods include cost-benefit analysis, cost-effectiveness analysis, cost utility analysis, and social return on investment.
- > When measuring the impact of CSOs, it is important to look at factors beyond these numeric measures, including processes of learning and change, as well as the sustainability of organisations.

How should donors decide who and what to fund?

It is extremely challenging to make a reliable economic assessment of different delivery options: measures that work effectively at project level may not work at scale; it is harder to measure changes in complex programmes with multiple and competing objectives; all costs and benefits can't be known; and the deadline for delivering benefits is often uncertain.

The approach taken by [BOND](#) argues that when one designs and implements an intervention, the cost and benefit of different options should be compared, and then a defensible narrative case should be made for why the chosen approach provides the best use of resources, and delivers the most value. In practice, that involves asking evaluation questions including why some measures are prioritised, and how barriers to social inclusion have been overcome.

Reading time:

🕒 3–5 minutes

Who is this for:

FEDO 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:

- > Overview
- > How should donors decide who and what to fund?
- > Can donors be reasonably secure that they are promoting democratic freedoms by funding CSOs and that there is economic value in funding CSOs directly?
- > Shifts in the democratic and donor landscape

It is also important to consider the angle from which VfM is assessed. Is it in relation to the economic value of resources spent on the intervention, or the quality of the output that is delivered, compared to the resources invested? It is important to examine the nature of the intervention from a beneficiary or community perspective, rather than only looking at whether it makes economic sense in terms of investment. VfM as an approach is not always the best option, and evaluations also need to examine to what extent investments enable quality transformation and real community impact.

Can donors be reasonably secure that they are promoting democratic freedoms by funding CSOs, and that there is economic value in funding CSOs directly?

Democracy – as promoted by Western countries – may be different from how democracy is conceptualised and maintained on the African continent. For example, there have been citizen protests against democratically governments across the continent. It is important to examine society and communities in their diverse forms. This includes examining the different types of CSOs, and the effects and value of emerging and more informal social movements in supporting strong governance. While the links between better civil society, better outcomes, and better democratisation are fairly well-proven, the link between better democratic outcomes and support to civil society by donors has not necessarily been proven. This requires extensive research over a longer period.

There is a lot that is being done with conventional research methods to determine what Southern partners value the most. [Such studies](#) show the benefits of core and strategic funding, but not the comparative value of different funding modalities. CSOs are often supported by multiple donors, so looking at support from a single donor in isolation does not make sense. Donors could undertake a long-term, coordinated, and systematic study of what is the most effective donor support. Such analysis might break away from traditional methods, adopting more participatory approaches involving different donors, with the meaningful involvement of local communities, and proper collaboration between Northern and Southern institutions. This approach could have a significant impact on the way that donors work, and may contribute towards shifting power dynamics. There is a growing push-back against top-down approaches, and measures need to evaluate the extent to which interventions contribute to transformative and long-term change.

Shifts in the democratic and donor landscape

There is a substantive literature on democratic regression. In some cases, governments have politicised support from international donors, in both authoritarian and non-authoritarian regimes. In situations where democracy is being eroded, or where the civic space is shrinking, it is important for donors to build alliances and connections, so that they can continue to provide alternative forms of support, such as taking a multi-layered approach to promote digital resilience for CSOs in contexts where citizens are not able to engage openly with the government, or build networks across the region. It might be possible to reverse closed civic space, however there is a general trend towards governments becoming more repressive over time. However – not all hope is lost: even in situations where governance regresses, there is still appetite and ability for democratic governance within citizen collaborations, and this could create change at a later date.

Conversations about shifting the power of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), and localisation, are now becoming mainstream. Evaluations need to take into account the needs and expectations of the people that programmes and projects are serving. We no longer need to evaluate whether to work with CSOs or to localise, but to focus on how to do that and what the most effective modalities are.

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