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Knowledge Mapping on Strengthening Civil Society

Final Report

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Team members
Lorina McAdam
Hoa Thi Le Nguyen
Cassidy McGinn

This report was prepared based on data collected and interpreted by HMST for Norad. It is being shared for informational and discussion purposes. Its contents do not necessarily represent the views or intentions of Norad.

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health management support team

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Executive Summary

Civil society organisations, human rights defenders and social movements are operating in a global environment marked by growing repression, volatility and uncertainty, while facing funding shocks, shrinking civic space and rising demand for both rapid response and accountability. Democratic norms are being rolled back, and the legitimacy and safety of civil society actors, particularly those working on democracy, rights, and equality, are increasingly under threat. Yet also evident are resilience, innovation, new alliances and renewed forms of organising. This knowledge mapping exercise has been commissioned by Norad at an opportune time to understand what has been working, and what will be needed by civil society actors to push back against rising authoritarianism and threats to human rights.

This work draws on a desk review of over 70 documents and 19 in-depth interviews with donors and civil society actors, including both intermediary and grassroots CSOs. It explores five learning questions centred on (1) effective activities, methods, and ways of working, (2) effective partnerships, (3) complementarity and conflicts between advocacy and service delivery, (4) donor approaches that foster local ownership and leadership, and (5) monitoring progress in the democracy and human rights space. The findings identify areas of strong convergence between the literature and interviews, as well as nuances across different types of civil society actors, including civil society organisations (CSOs), human rights defenders and social movements. However, the mapping team acknowledges that the interview sample size is limited. There has also been limited time to integrate the additional documentation received during interviews.

Effective activities, methods and ways of working

Across the review, four principles were found to consistently underpin effective civil society action: (1) Grassroots legitimacy of civil society actors, anchored in close relationships with constituencies; (2) Rights-based and intersectional approaches that reflect core values of inclusion, equality, and participation; (3) Long-term strategies with the agility to adapt and contribute to organisational or movement strengthening; and (4) Connected action through networks, coalitions and solidarity, reflecting a growing need to work across silos, sectors, movements and borders. Effective activities are highly context-specific, but tend to cluster around organising and mobilisation, advocacy and accountability, learning and sharing, documentation and protection, and solidarity action. These approaches reinforce civic agency, create political pressure, and protect those at risk. The current context requires rapid re-strategising and collective responses, while ensuring that these approaches reinforce civil society actor connection and credibility with their base.

Effective partnership models

Partnership effectiveness is shaped less by a type or structure, than by the extent to which a partnership (1) has clear and common goals; (2) equitably shares power and decision-making; (3) fosters trust, transparency and mutual accountability; (4) clearly shares roles and risks; and (5) has sufficient resourcing for coordination and connection. Partnerships spanning thematic, sectoral or geographic boundaries are increasingly important in the face of transnational repression and the evolving nature of movements and interests.

These diverse partnerships can draw on the different strengths and networks of its members, whether it is on-the-ground mobilisation and lived experience, technical expertise, convening power, access to decision-making spaces, or policy influence.

Advocacy and service delivery

Advocacy and service delivery by the same organisation can be complementary or conflicting, depending on the context and nature of services provided. Service delivery can reinforce advocacy by building legitimacy, creating trust with communities and generating data that strengthens policy influence. Some grassroots CSOs mentioned service delivery was also a source of organisational survival. In crises, humanitarian or protection services also provide critical entry points for rights-based engagement. At the same time, adding service delivery risks overstretching organisations, shifting them away from their mandate, potentially creating a perceived conflict of interest; or exposing them to government retaliation when advocacy is politically sensitive. This can force an organisation to stop one or other of the activities. Therefore, while the two can be complementary, in some contexts, the findings point to the need for an ecosystem approach to ensure that all required both roles can be conducted safely and effectively.

Supporting local ownership and leadership

There was strong alignment between literature and interviews on effective approaches that donors can adopt to support local ownership and leadership. These include: (1) Long-term, flexible and predictable funding, especially core support; (2) Investment in organisational strengthening and leadership development aligned with partner priorities; (3) Deliberate power-shifting to local actors through participatory governance, co-design and shared decision-making; (4) Supporting enabling environments and ecosystems, not just individual organisations; (5) Listening, mutuality and shared risk; and (6) Convening for peer learning, solidarity and access to global spaces. Several excellent practices were identified, including peer-led or peer-reviewed grantmaking, organisational assessments led by partner priorities, and supporting an ecosystem that supports activists and unregistered groups. The role of intermediary organisations (including re-granters) was also found to be important, with several good practices identified for how their role can be supportive of local ownership and leadership. Building on these good practices is critical, given that poor practices can be exploitative of grassroots organisations.

Monitoring and measuring change

Monitoring is most effective when centred on learning and adaptation rather than compliance. Qualitative, narrative-based and participatory approaches such as outcome harvesting, contribution analysis and storytelling were found to better capture non-linear and contested advocacy outcomes. Data often needs to be triangulated, and the most effective monitoring emerged when supported by organisation-wide reflection, peer review, proximity to the ground, validation across the movement, and donor curiosity. Some examples were found of multi-year learning approaches as a better way of not only capturing changes but understanding how change happens, particularly at the eco-system level. The interviews focused on organisational and grant monitoring, while the document review revealed a broader set of sector-wide tools, which may be used in tandem with country or grant-specific measures.

Conclusion

Overall, the evidence indicates that locally grounded, long-term, flexible and trust-based support through equitable partnerships is the most effective way to strengthen civil society's contribution to democratic and rights-based change. Civil society actors are adapting with creativity and determination despite profound challenges. There is a recognition of the need to prioritise local leadership, and to consider investments in the context of the wider ecosystem. The nature of this work is becoming increasingly political, and there are growing calls for coordination and solidarity among the donors, intermediary organisations and civil society on the ground to pool learning and resources to be the most effective. Increasingly, there is a need to continue supporting civil society across the ecosystem – CSOs, human rights defenders and movements – as an end in itself, as a critical democratic actor critical to upholding human rights and democratic resilience.

Acronyms & Abbreviations

CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CLM	Community-led monitoring
CSD	Civil society development
CSO	Civil society organisation
Danida	Danish International Development Agency
HIC	High-income country
HMST	Health Management Support Team
HRD	Human rights defender
GBMSM	Gay, bisexual and men who have sex with men
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, binary, transgender, queer, intersex and other identities
LMIC	Low- and middle-income countries
ODA	Official development assistance
RCF	Robert Carr Foundation
SDC	Swiss Development Cooperation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SIDA	Swedish International Development Agency
SM	Social movement

1. Introduction

Norad recognises that a healthy civil society is essential to ensuring more democratic and rights-based societies, and one of Norway's international development aims is to support civil society in these efforts. To improve the quality and effectiveness of Norway's support to civil society, Norad has commissioned a knowledge mapping exercise to update its knowledge base on relevant, effective approaches to strengthening civil society in ODA-recipient countries. This work comes at a particularly critical time, as the development world is reeling from the withdrawal of USAID funding and technical leadership, and many countries – including donor countries – are seeing a rise in authoritarianism and a subsequent roll back of rights and shrinking of civic space.

Health Management Support Team (HMST) was selected by Norad to undertake this work. HMST brings experience with civil society organisations (CSOs) based in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), however the company and the consultants involved operate outside of Norad's ecosystem. The team therefore brings an independent perspective, free of preconceptions of Norad's historical and current investments and ways of working. That being said, the purpose of this document is not to provide recommendations to Norad – only to present current knowledge, thinking and best practices.

The knowledge mapping is organised around the following five learning questions.

1. Which **methods, activities or 'ways of working**' applied by civil society organisations appear to be most effective?

2. Which **partnership models** applied by civil society organisations (irrespective of donors' roles) appear to be most effective?

3. Civil society organisations play important roles both in **fostering more democratic and rights-based societies, and in delivering services**. To what degree do these roles appear to be complementary and mutually reinforcing, and – conversely – appear to be conflicting and mutually exclusive?

4. Which **donor approaches to supporting local ownership and leadership** within and through civil society organisations appear to be most effective? And which appear to be counter-productive?

5. How do donors and civil society organisations **monitor progress** towards the desired impact (fostering more democratic and rights-based societies)?

This knowledge mapping report presents responses to these questions drawn from the document review, and interviews with donors, intermediary and grassroots CSOs.

2. Methodology

The full methodology and tools were presented in an inception report, approved by Norad on 3 November. The team subsequently undertook three types of activities to develop this report: a document review, key informant interviews, and team analysis.

Document review

The list of documents reviewed is presented in Annex 1, and includes technical guidance (OECD), reports produced by donors, documents produced by non-government actors, and peer-reviewed journal articles. To support the document review, a coding framework was created to include the five learning questions and sub-categories. Documents were then reviewed and coded by the team using a qualitative data software. This was used to extract and group the relevant quotes from each document, allowing the team to review the content of each document thematically. As a frame of reference, this approach identified 246 quotes relevant to question 1, 72 for question 2, 66 for question 3, 334 for question 4, and 40 for question 5. This indicates that the literature provided uneven coverage of the five questions. An AI tool was also used to help identify trends and themes to cross-check the team's analysis. In addition to this systematic review, additional documents shared by interviewees were also reviewed, but not coded in the same way as the original documents collected and not fully exploited by the team.

Key informant interviews

Nineteen interviews were conducted for this mapping: eight with donors, five with "intermediary" civil society organisations (defined as CSOs that pass funding or support on to other CSOs, typically headquartered in a high-income country [HIC]), and six with "grassroots" organisations (defined as CSOs working directly at the community level, and/or headquartered and working solely in LMICs)[1], including 28 individuals. The "intermediary" and "grassroots" distinction emerged organically during the knowledge mapping process, when it was recognised that these groups had distinct roles, experiences and perspectives. Following the submission of the first draft, five more grassroots CSOs were interviewed to address the initial under-representation. All but one of the grassroots CSOs had no experience with Norad. A list of the people and organisations interviews completed is presented in Annex 2.

Identified organisations were contacted by Norad to introduce the work and HMST, and HMST followed up to schedule the interview. The invitation email included an overview of the five learning questions, and outlined the approach to the interview, including that we intended to record a transcript of the conversation. At the beginning of each interview, HMST reinforced the voluntary nature of the interview and each question, clarified that the

[1] One CSO indicated as a "grassroots" CSO is actually a network, but as it does not operate in the same way as other intermediary CSOs, and is headquartered in an LMIC, it was classified as more grassroots than intermediary. Also, three donors are actually pooled fund mechanisms, which operate slightly differently. This is noted in the report, where necessary. All this to say, the distinctions are not always clear.

interview would have no bearing on funding decisions, confirmed that responses would be anonymised in the report, reiterated the intended use of the transcript, and sought verbal consent for recording the transcript, which was noted in the interview notes. All interview participants provided verbal consent. The interviews all took place on Teams, and an AI tool was used to record transcripts. Each interview took between 50 minutes and 1 hour and 15 minutes.

Interview notes and transcripts (278 pages) were integrated and AI was used to generate summaries of responses to the five question areas, providing an overview of any differences between responses from donors and CSOs. AI was also used to identify any significant differences between the desk review findings and the interview responses. This analysis was used to cross-check against the team's own analysis and interpretation to identify gaps, and potentially help identify or correct for team biases, and does not form the basis of this report. Quotes have been drawn from the transcripts, but lightly edited when necessary for brevity, clarity or to ensure anonymity, without changing the meaning.

Team analysis

The team met on 19 November to review the learning questions based on (a) the document review, and (b) the interviews. This meeting surfaced the key issues, findings and observations related to each learning question. It also served to identify categories that could further disaggregate analysis (e.g. differences between supporting CSOs, human rights defenders, and social movements). The team regrouped on 8 December to re-review the analysis following Norad's feedback, highlighting areas for further exploration and reinforcement.

Limitations

There was initially limited time between data collection and preliminary report writing, and the team was concerned by the relatively small sample size. This was addressed by allowing for more time for analysis after the first draft. This updated version of the report also benefitted from the inclusion of interviews with grassroots CSOs to triangulate responses previously received from donors and intermediary organisations. The additional groups interviewed were identified by the consultants through either existing contact or referrals. All are community-led organisations, representing two sex worker networks, one group of gay, bisexual and men who have sex with men (GBMSM), one trans group, and one group of people with disabilities in Eastern and Southern Africa, which also supports the rights of women and children. The team is now more confident that the work has identified and organised the most important learnings from diverse perspectives. However, we also noted that some practices are changing rapidly and it is difficult to predict to what extent the lessons of the past will (a) be applicable in the rapidly evolving context, (b) will change in response to growing authoritarianism, increasingly conservative agendas, and reduced funding.

3. Findings

Contextual analysis

This section outlines the team's findings in response to the five learning questions. Before that, however, it is worth sharing that many interview respondents noted the timeliness of this exercise considering the rapidly shifting context. Many respondents shared their analysis of the context, which is useful background to the findings. Some of the main trends may be summarised as follows.

1. **Increasingly restrictive and unpredictable environment** was a top concern among respondents. Many described a global rollback of democratic norms, a tightening of civic space, and more aggressive repression of organising and activism. Agreements on human rights are no longer honoured or stable, with some governments – in both lower- and middle-income as well as high-income donor countries – pulling back on previous commitments. Some countries are rapidly shifting policies and practices, which requires constant adaptation and creates significant uncertainty. One donor described it as an "erosion of previously settled human rights and democracy commitments." This results in greater unpredictability, uncertain allyship, and growing risk. One donor noted that unpredictable contexts are harder to work in than in closed spaces. "In an autocracy, in a closed space, you know what's permitted and it's pretty stable. You don't have much space, but you know who's who, you know the rules. It's the countries where things change quickly. Maybe there's a foreign agent's law that comes, maybe there's a law to restrict social media or to restrict protest, freedom of assembly. And maybe you don't know if it's going to pass, you don't know if it does. It's in those countries in the middle where the rules are very fluid, where it's hard to build that trust because most governments, they have national interests and so they're sort of playing back and forth."

   This was also raised in the context of supporting social movements, where the unpredictability of a law or policy outcome, or the change in a prominent individual could create a sudden contextual change, disrupting plans and support. Examples were shared where a CSO had invested in developing the support of a politician or champion, who is ousted with a change in government, requiring these efforts to start over again. Another example of unpredictability related to litigation for decriminalisation of homosexuality. "The outcome of court judgments is somewhat unpredictable. So, when a judgment is given by a court, immediately the context changes, and you can't predetermine what activities you'd need to have after that. So, whereas in Namibia, in Zambia, in Botswana as well as in Mauritius, where the court ruled, the grantees might have had a plan for a positive outcome in some cases. But for example, in Namibia, there was a kind of a positive outcome, but the backlash that came from several politicians and other social organizations meant that that plan for how to deepen the receptiveness of the society to this positive judgment was not what needed to be done. What needed to be done was a retreat, a retreat from frontline so as not to exacerbate the negative backlash."

2. **Funding shocks and staff turnover** are affecting human rights and democracy work. This impacts not only ongoing efforts but affects institutional knowledge and disrupts relationships at every level. Some mentioned the need to talk about "before January and after January", noting the direct shocks of the withdrawal of USAID funding, and its ripple effects, as much of this support was linked to other donor efforts. One CSO observed that "almost every group had to adjust… and many had to simply cease a lot of work." Some donors noted that more philanthropic donors were beginning to step up to support, but all donors noted that even with these increased efforts, it would not be able to fill the gap. One donor was able to make more flexible funding available. "The motivation for that was more ensuring that the organisations and networks that make up the movements don't disappear, so basically to simply ensure that they still exist, even if many at a reduced scale. And that meant disproportionately at that time, just paying for people's salaries, key personnel – not all the project personnel – but key personnel." The implication is that the ecosystem is currently in survival mode, requiring a different approach. In addition to solution on direct funding, some donor also tried to maximize their convening power to broker and facilitate their partners to new recourses.

   The most common response by CSOs – both intermediary and grassroots – is to simultaneously try to diversify funding and reduce costs. One intermediary CSO saw the situation of financial dependence as "an existential risk for us as an organisation", particularly if changing donor "values are not compatible" with the organisation's values. Intermediary CSOs spoke of reaching out to institutional and non-traditional donors, including the private sector, and some mentioned trying to do more public fundraising. One intermediary and one grassroots CSO spoke of looking to increase income generation as another path to sustainability, i.e. producing and selling goods or services. However, one grassroots CSO that uses this approach to support the economic empowerment of its members is finding that this is covering less than 20% of its costs.

   While additional funding is sought, all CSOs are shrinking. Many organisations spoke of cutting staff. One intermediary CSO said "we're also trying to sort of focus a bit more, having fewer countries, these kinds of things." For grassroots CSOs, the impacts are more immediate. One shared, "The network just dropped. We have moved to a small office. We have started initiatives for our micro-planners to be self-sustainable by starting [income-generating] projects. We are also referring our community to government clinics which we have sensitised. We are also trying to partner with other organisations. We have reduced working hours and days we now work from home." Another spoke of their loss of office as loss of a safe space and the loss of stipends for peer educators as increasing their vulnerability, and in some cases resulting in homelessness. Another concern was that at the grassroots level, many CSOs mentioned increased confusion and competition for resources, creating tensions and threatening cohesion among partners.

3. **The current crisis is fast-moving and conflict-prone**, which is requiring faster responses, and a greater need for safety and security of people on the ground. Some of these conflicts not only increase the need for agile advocacy work, but

also the provision of services, whether its humanitarian aid to people affected by conflict, or medical, legal or other protection support for activists. This is stretching CSOs, requiring quick shifts in roles, which can in turn change an organisation's relationship with its constituency, and potentially creating winners and losers.

4. **The nature of activism and actors is changing**. Some respondents spoke to movements being increasingly youth-led, informal and fluid, operating outside traditional CSO structures. Some also pointed to the rise in popular activism, where people are joining movements or activities for the first time, including culture-based activism, through music, art and digital organizing. One intermediate CSO noted a move from traditional partnerships to ecosystem approaches, with a focus on collective strategies. "We need to find a shift towards finding more popular expressions, whether that's through social movements, through culture, through music, through education, through poetry, literature, so on and so forth. There is a need to recentre what historically social movements are, and these causes of women's rights, workers' rights, so on and so forth, that have been advanced not just by salaried bureaucrats, but by other forms of cultural expression." This is considered important to ensure that activism is not only done by "professional" organisations, or "something that other people will take care," but that activism becomes accessible through more cultural expression.

5. **There is a shift in what people are mobilising around**. While only one intermediary CSO mentioned it, there is an observation that people – particularly young people – are mobilising less for traditional political and civil rights, and more around social and economic rights. More action is observed in relation to anti-corruption, jobs, land, healthcare, housing, women's rights and climate justice. This may have implications for how donors support rights work, and it was also observed that some groups have chosen to focus specifically on inequality, rather than rights per se.

6. **The power dynamics of aid are being challenged**. While there has been a call to decolonise aid for several years now, declining US funding and influence is being viewed as an opportunity to centre more around domestic popular legitimacy, rather than donor country geopolitics. This is coming at a time where other actors (China and Russia, for example) are potential entrants in this space, and respondents see a push for a "rebirth" of rights work rooted in local actors, rather than foreign aid.

Many respondents are seeing a global environment defined by repression, volatility and uncertainty, with fewer resources available to address the challenges facing human rights and democracy. Yet a response is also being seen that can be characterised by innovation, resilience, realignment of agendas, and new partnerships cutting across old silos. Therefore, while there is significant concern, the team also heard examples of hope, optimism and a commitment to create opportunities out of the current crisis.

Q1. Methods, activities and ways of working

Learning Question 1. Which methods, activities or 'ways of working' applied by civil society organisations appear to be most effective?

Four key principles emerged regarding effective methods, activities and ways of working applied by CSOs:

1. **Grassroots legitimacy.** Effective activities emerge when decisions are grounded in the needs and interests of CSOs' base, where there is trust and close connection with their constituencies. All ways of working must support legitimacy.

2. **Intersectional rights.** They live their values, particularly in terms of being rights-based and participatory; and apply this in different areas to uphold related principles including gender equality, do no harm, social justice and non-violence. One donor's data indicated that intersectional partnerships has been increasing in the past few years, particularly to address discrimination and harm reduction. There is also a growing common focus on economic rights in addition to political rights.

   Box 1: Intersectional rights

   Many examples of intersectional rights emerged from the interviews. One donor shared that "The most exciting work has been done at the intersection of civic space and security, civic space and other issues… where abstract concepts like expression and assembly become life." This could include bringing different affected groups together over an issue such as land rights. At the grassroots, criminalized and/or stigmatised populations, including sex workers, GBMSM, and trans people recognise intersectional rights. These populations can all face stigma and discrimination in their families, communities and when accessing services (particularly health, and specifically sexual and reproductive health and rights), violence and police brutality. All face challenges to be represented in decision-making bodies and have their voices heard. Disability rights and migrant rights were also found to be cross-cutting across women's, trans and other rights, and many criminalised groups overlap, such as trans sex workers who use drugs. One representative of a stigmatised group also spoke of the need for climate justice, as climate is affecting their community and their economic opportunities.

3. **Long-termism**. When organisations work on a long-term strategy and align their efforts with that strategy, including investments in strengthening their capacity. This also requires an ability to be agile and adapt their approaches in response to change.

4. **Connected**. When organisations connect and collaborate across silos and work in coalitions or networks for South-to-South learning, solidarity and greater impact by joining forces and bringing different skills and strengths.

Box 2: Connections

Donors, intermediary and grassroots CSOs all highlighted the importance of connections at multiple levels, and increasingly across silos. Grassroots organisations can link with national bodies, that link with regional organisations, who have a voice at the global level, with information and ideas flowing up and down the chain. These connections help strengthen capacity, and keep efforts grounded in grassroots reality and lived experience. Different groups along the chain can also advocate at their respective levels, and when a platform exists for their coordination, deeper analysis is possible. One donor explained, "when it comes to our own coordinating umbrella organisation which is a joint platform for [our country's] organizations working in developing countries, they produce very high-level analytical material thanks to that platform partnership and are influential in the sense of collecting voices from civil society on what should be known in bilateral aid work, development aid work, but also feeding back into their own operations. They are also part of some international coalitions, where… they are entering into a sphere where their voices kind of multiplies." Civicus facilitated a broad-based coalition to influence the Sustainable Development Goals (Action 2015), ensuring a more inclusive approach that worked across silos and built on civil society diversity and strength. Donors and intermediary organisations therefore have an important role to play as a convenor and connector. One intermediary CSO shared "Young Kenyan movement leaders are now online to inspire… young women in Ukraine who are facing the same challenges… they are using the same organising experiences."

Specific effective activities, methods and ways of working are harder to pin down, due to their extremely context-specific nature, and the fact that many activities do not take place in isolation, but as part of a wider ecosystem of action. Many of the people interviewed were also a step or two removed from the actual activities on the ground. While the learning question focuses on the work of CSOs, the team also heard about how CSO work differs from the work of Human Rights Defenders (HRD) and Social Movements (SM). Therefore, what is considered effective may vary, as is the support that each of these types of actors need. Further analysis on this is provided in Table 1 below, and the following discussion may combine these three types of actors.

Four broad categories of work emerged that prove effective in promoting human rights and democracy (and for some cases, addressing inequality), in which the above principles can be recognised:

1. **Organising, mobilisation and constituency building.** Civil society actors strengthen democratic participation by organising communities, sharing information and educating constituents, mobilising collective action, and strengthening constituencies' ability to (safely) demand their rights. The literature points to the importance of "citizen participation and empowerment" and community oversight mechanisms, including community-led monitoring (CLM). Actors are increasingly required to rapidly re-strategise and adapt tactics as contexts change – particularly in the face the increasing violence. These organising processes are seen as crucial for sustained democratic participation, building collective voice, creating political pressure, and connecting people to decision-making processes that might

otherwise exclude them.

2. **Advocacy and accountability work.** Effective civil society action includes civic education, election monitoring, and public accountability efforts, particularly when there is a focus on rights-based advocacy. Civil society advocacy efforts were found to be more effective when reinforced through structured engagement with other bodies, such as UN agencies, international organisations and technical specialists. At the same time, donors reported that advocacy also requires that community members and constituents remain involved so that advocacy does not become removed from lived experience. An example was also provided of individual action that could result in laws being blocked, where additional safety and security work can be required to complement advocacy efforts.

3. **Documentation of rights and protection**. Civil society actors perform a critical democratic function by documenting abuses, defending civic freedoms, and protecting those targeted by repressions. Some organisations support legal accountability, particularly for marginalised groups, which can be operationalised through documenting rights violations, providing early warning of deteriorating civic space, monitoring the passage of restrictive laws, and defending and directly supporting protestors and human rights defenders (e.g. physical, psychosocial and online protection, shelter, legal or medical assistance). As with advocacy efforts, this work can be more effective when linked with influential partners or platforms to elevate concerns and bring attention to rights abuses through different mechanisms.

4. **Solidarity action.** Interview respondents consistently spoke of the importance of working in partnership as a key activity of civil society, in addition to being a way of working. This could be done to harmonise demands, build collective leverage, pool skills and resources, reach a broader constituency or target group, and to learn. This type of work may occur at a local level across silos or sectors, as well as across countries and regions. Global solidarity has been called out as increasingly important given that "authoritarianism is transnational", requiring the response to be as well. It was also emphasised that developing partnerships, networks, coalition and solidarity can occur organically, but it typically requires concerted effort and resources, which is why it is called out here as a separate method that requires support.

Service delivery may also be seen an effective activity in this space; however, opinions and experiences varied widely, and this issue will be discussed under learning question 3, related to the complementarity or conflict of service delivery and advocacy. Similarly, both donors and CSOs spoke about how donors and intermediary organisations can help or hinder effective practices in response to this question, which will be reserved for learning question 4 discussion in section 3.5.

Q2. Partnership models

Learning Question 2. Which partnership models applied by civil society organisations (irrespective of donors' roles) appear to be most effective?

This question proved challenging to analyse consistently, due to the different partnerships that were discussed, including: donor to intermediary, intermediary to grassroots CSO, CSO to CSO, CSO to network, network to network, CSO to other partners or actors, and other combinations of these groups, sometimes at the local, national, regional or global level. Some of these relationships involve grants, and others do not, and some partnerships extended beyond an initial grant-related relationship. There also appear to be emerging partnerships between different types of donors, such as between bilateral donors and private foundations. It was noted that effective partnerships could be formal or informal, short-term or long-term, and opportunistic or strategic. Depending on how they emerged and what they intended to do, each of these types of partnerships could be effective. What appear to be the critical factors in ensuring effectiveness more relate to:

- Having a common goal
- Shared power within the partnership
- Clear roles, responsibilities and contributions drawing on respective strengths
- Transparency and information sharing
- Mutual accountability and trust
- Equitable / perceived equity of resource sharing
- Risk sharing (see Box 3).

There is emphasis in the literature and among interviewees on the growing importance of Global South ownership of partnerships, with a call for "co-created, rights-based partnerships", built on shared power, trust and long-term engagement.[2] Specific examples of these types of partnerships emerged in the interviews, where Northern and Southern networks have come together to combine policy influence and grounded experience to influence international organisations. One intermediary CSO shared an example of donors working together to fill critical gaps when US funding was cut to "keep the lights on", and to ensure that "information still goes out", ensuring that the organisation could keep functioning and contributing to the ecosystem.

[2] CARE International. (2018). CARE International resource on civil society collaboration and partnerships. Geneva: CARE International. Link

Box 3: Examples of Risk Sharing

Compliance risks
Both interviews and the literature found that accessing donor funding can create operational and fiduciary risks for a CSO. This can be shared by donors, if compliance requirements are eased with "proportionate compliance requirements" are developed, or by intermediary CSOs, if they assume responsibility for some or all of the compliance and reporting requirements.

Risks to effectiveness
When the work is not locally designed or led, projects may not be well suited to a context, creating risk for an implementing CSO. This risk can be shared by allowing implementing CSOs a greater say in project design, as well as greater flexibility in implementation and budget use, to be able to respond to changes on the ground. Effectiveness risks can also be mitigated by investing in organisational capacity strengthening, and not over-stretching CSOs.

Reputational risks
Some grassroots organisations do not want to be seen as receiving money from or partnering with some donors or intermediary CSOs in some contexts – particularly if receiving foreign money can make them a target. This risk can be shared by direct funding of activities or finding different ways to channel resources. Reputational risks can also be mitigated by not requiring CSOs to work in areas beyond their mandate.

Advocacy risks
Some advocacy work can put a local organisation at risk if it is seen as confronting the government. In these cases, an intermediary CSO or a donor may be able to take on some of these activities to shelter or deflect attention from the local partner.

Safety and security risks
Many implementation CSOs are putting themselves, and their families at potential risk of arrest, harassment, assault, theft, or even death. One donor and one grassroots CSO mentioned the importance of offering frontline actors and their family's insurance so that frontline actors have some protection and compensation. Another donor's approach is to allocate 5% of the total budget "for quick safety and security responsiveness as might be necessary." One grassroots CSO mentioned the injustice of knowing that international staff at intermediary CSOs receive insurance coverage, whereas it is generally the grassroots actors who are at more direct risk – often directly as a result of the activities they are being paid to do. Two grassroots CSO spoke of the importance of having a safe place for activists to stay, as many feel exposed where they currently live. This can be addressed through stipends or providing safe houses.

Sources: Interviews, and CALP Network. (2023). *The state of the world's cash 2023, Oxford: CALP.* Link

Respondents spoke of the growing existence and value of diverse partnerships that span sectors and technical specialities, or for cross-movement or cross-issue coalition building. In these cases, the role and contribution of each partner is clear and needed for the partnership's success, which ensures shared power and ownership. It also allows each partner to contribute within their capacity, without inadvertently jeopardising their mandate, work and capacity. Examples of capacity strengthening were heard across the board, including institutional and technical capacity strengthening. While grassroots organisations cited this benefit of partnerships consistently, even intermediary CSOs can benefit from donor influence. One intermediary CSO noted that they have learned to strengthen their evidence generation as a result of donor encouragement. "It's Norad which pushed us to be a little bit more evidence-based: No evidence base, no research, no funding. And so you needed to step up, because how do you really measure progress? So the push came from Norad, and we're very thankful for that push, because we've become more professional organisation."

Donors also have to be aware of the risks that they may be putting their partners in. One shared "There is a high risk that by funding civil society actors that are active in advocacy or in watchdog functions that we actually delegitimise them. We've seen this in several countries where suddenly some civil society partners were at the eye of the storm and having this foreign funding for them can also be detrimental." However, generally, diverse partnerships can also help to spread risk and protect the most exposed members of the partnership. There was also recognition of a need for more cross-country alliances – particularly in response to global forces. As one donor explained, "So authoritarianism, anti-rights activity, it's transnational. We see what's happening in Hungary and Argentina, United States and Cambodia and other places, there are many similarities, there are groups that are learning. And so as civil society, we need to be locally rooted, have a constituency, but we also need to be learning from each other and supporting, having solidarity."

Many donors shared examples of how they play a convening role, bringing partners together to share experiences and reflect together. This has resulted in some cases in new partnerships, collaborations and strategies that emerged organically from this connection. CSOs also expressed appreciation for these opportunities, particularly when the focus was on learning and connection, rather than accountability. One donor mentioned having the CSOs themselves facilitating parts of the meeting as a way of sharing power and ownership, enriching the donor's own learning experience.

Resources were raised frequently as critical to support effective partnerships, even if the partnership itself is not of a financial nature. Partnerships take time to develop and maintain and cannot necessarily be done as part of other activities but require dedicated time or staff. Partnerships also require spaces to meet, means of exchange, resources to conduct joint analysis or produce joint statements, and the ability to travel and represent. It was mentioned that in a funding crisis, supporting meetings and partnerships can be the first thing to be cut from budgets, but it is precisely at these times that supporting partnerships is the most critical.

Resources to support partnerships is separate from partnerships based on financing, such

as a donor/recipient relationship. This automatically creates a power imbalance, but as discussion under learning question 4 will show, there are ways in which this can be mitigated. This is critical, as these relationships can serve as important bridge-builders between different actors, and create access for both HIC and LMIC actors to connect in ways that would not have otherwise been possible. The role of funding to motivate the formation of partnership was also mentioned, which can be powerful if what began as a relationship of convenience emerges into a genuine collaboration, characterised by the factors listed above. One intermediary CSO mentioned "There are some partnerships that are the result of a funding opportunity. For instance, we're not being forced by the donor to choose specific partners, but we are forced to work in partnership. And our experience has been that it's useful." Grassroots CSO experience is mixed, however. These partnerships can be positive "When the international partner is honest about what they can and cannot do, and lets us lead locally, then the partnership works – even if the donor requires it."

However, these forced partnerships can be problematic if not developed and managed with the principles above in mind. One grassroots CSO experienced these partnerships not being fair or equal: "Most of the time we are approached because the donor requires a local partner. The project is already designed, the budget is already set, and our role is mainly implementation at community level." Another said, "They need us because we know the community and we have trust. But once the proposal is approved, decisions are taken elsewhere." There are also risks when implementation is imbalanced. "We are called a partner, but the money and the reporting go through the bigger organisation. Even the success stories are written from their perspective, not ours." Another shared the same sentiment: "It becomes difficult to challenge decisions or speak publicly, because they are the ones with the donor relationship." One CSO also mentioned the unfair expectations, and lack of risk sharing. "Because the donor funds them, they pass the reporting and compliance to us, but without budget. We are expected to meet donor standards without donor funding." One grassroots group is trying to avoid working with intermediary organisations altogether. "We're now advocating for direct funding, but if it goes through other organisations, will have same problem, we'll be exploited."

"We just remain as the receivers – just to go and implement what we are given… Then when you negotiate, they tell you, we are sorry, the donor did not agree to amend this budget. It is already approved and we can continue like that. So for us, it is just a matter of take it or leave it."

Some intermediary organisations recognise this risk, and some even spoke of the challenges that too much funding can create – particularly for supporting social movements. This speaks again to resourcing the support for the partnership itself, rather than just resourcing an organisation. As one intermediary explained, "Just giving huge, pooled funds to hit the movements with a lot of money is not the way forward. Rather, investing in this in-between infrastructure that then really hold true to the values of not making small NGOs out of the movements, but really providing relevant support based on their needs is a good way forward."

Q3. Advocacy and Service delivery

Learning Question 3. Civil society organisations play important roles both in fostering more democratic and rights-based societies, and in delivering services. To what degree do these roles appear to be complementary and mutually reinforcing, and – conversely – appear to be conflicting and mutually exclusive?

Discussion around the complementarity or conflict CSOs conducting advocacy and delivering services resulted in the most wide-ranging responses of all the learning questions. In short, these roles can be complementary or conflicting, depending on the context.

Complementary roles

The documentation provided examples of where services can underpin advocacy. For example, Denmark notes that in fragile contexts, civil society may deliver essential services that the state cannot, and that such services "play a part in bolstering democracy". This may be achieved by creating space to address sensitive subjects and facilitate dialogue with authorities.[3] Examples of rights-based services provided that civil society may provide included reproductive and sexual health, mental health, gender-based violence, LGBTQI+ services, and humanitarian aid. Examples in both the literature and interviews were found of civil society providing humanitarian aid in response to a conflict or crisis (including during Covid-19), particularly reaching to underserved communities.[4]

This view was reinforced in several interviews. One donor noted that combining the two "works well because it creates legitimacy and credibility". Many respondents reported that service delivery reinforces trust, and the connection between an organisation and its base. One example was shared of an advocacy CSO that began to provide services following a crisis, which strengthened support for its work and increased membership in that community, thereby increasing its advocacy potential. Another example included an intermediary CSO added funding for livelihood activities on top of their organisational development and advocacy work, which succeeded in attracting members and building community legitimacy. One CSO referred to service delivery as the main activity that allowed the group to attract funds, support, and exist.

Another important complementarity was the importance of generating data from service delivery to support evidence-based advocacy. Some (intermediary CSOs) believed that service provision by a human rights CSO could only be justified if was designed to inform and give credibility to the organisation's advocacy efforts. Others simply view the two roles as complementary. One donor noted that the two roles can create a virtuous cycle, whereby a CSO uses the data to improve their own service delivery and respond to those gaps locally, while also advocating for improved access to and quality of services at a

[3] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark. (2022). How-to note for implementation of "The World We Share": Danish support for civil society. Copenhagen: Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Link
[4] For example, WACSI & AGNA/CIVICUS. (2021). Civil society organisations' contributions to national development and post-COVID-19 rebuilding efforts in Ghana. Accra: WACSI. Link

broader level. A grassroots CSO shared this view and explained "I think those two are tied together because to be able to do advocacy, you need evidence. You need to be able to generate stories and narratives that you can use. Because of those services we offer, we are able to go to the Ministry of Health and say, 'this is why we need community health services', and that is part of advocacy. And then we generate messages and reports that we use to channel to discussions, either at national or regional level or county level. So those two complement each other, they don't conflict."

One donor took this point further, noting that the link between intermediary and grassroots CSOs can be strengthened by the complementary nature of service delivery and advocacy. Speaking of some of its larger intermediary CSOs that work in partnership, "They have a strong voice, advocacy role on sexual reproductive health and rights, LGBT+, advocacy, etc. And then they also work very much on the ground, for example in Ethiopia and Uganda with health clinics, with access to support for various groups of people, very vulnerable groups as well. I think my overall assessment is that it provides a lot of legitimacy for the group, that they have that anchorage in their engagement, that they know what they're talking about. It's not our partner who's providing that service delivery on the ground, it's their local partners, and what they do is that they create the path for local partners to be in those advocacy spaces. So basically, they provide the space and the seat for them to speak for themselves and to have a voice and to be included in that overall policy and advocacy engagement."

A third complementarity was raised by a grassroots CSO, whereby service delivery could be enhanced by advocacy to influence "structural aspects". This particularly related to addressing stigma and discrimination facing criminalized or marginalized populations to promote service uptake. "We find [combining service delivery and advocacy] very useful because you cannot offer medical interventions without the structural interventions." This point also illustrated the value of having different organisations in the same eco-system working in complementary ways. "The need for drop-in centres was raised after most of the mainstream organisations were offering biomedical and the government was offering biomedical, but still there was a decrease in the services uptake. But when we introduced the drop-in centres integrated into our structural interventions to support the biomedical, then there was end-user uptake because they were feeling safe."

Conflicting roles

In other contexts, some respondents had concerns about organisations conducting both advocacy and providing services. In some case, this was based on the principle that service delivery must be the government's responsibility. As one intermediary CSO put it, "we can't take over government responsibilities without trying to address the issues and get the government at some point to take back the responsibilities that they have for caring for the population." It was acknowledged that service delivery can help to build legitimacy, "But our theory is not that you gain legitimacy through service delivery, but rather that you gain legitimacy because you represent or work with or gain trust with people." Respondents who shared these views also raised concerns that organisations who begin delivering services risk changing the perception of the organisation to being a source of something, rather than as a representative.

Doing both can also overstretch an organisation's capacity limited. This is related to resource availability, and it was mentioned that there are more funding opportunities available for service delivery than advocacy, and that this funding can be easier to secure. There is also a perception among some that donors prefer funding service delivery because it is easier to brand and to measure, and that the expectation of service delivery can interfere with the mandate of an advocacy organisation. Some respondents noted the risk of dependency on a donor for service sustainability, and one raised a concern that service delivery can trigger conflict with other local actors. This puts not only the service, but the organisation at risk if funding ends. This concern highlights again the need to consider an ecosystem approach, rather than organisation specific. As one donor shared, "don't expect one organisation to do both… capacitate a field rather an organisation."

Finally, examples were shared of where an organisation's advocacy role puts it in a difficult situation with the government. One donor provided two examples of organisations threatened with closure because of advocacy activities, jeopardising the sustainability of critical functions. In these cases, the organisations were forced to reposition or relocate. A CSO explained that "When you do advocacy, the government sees you as a threat and tends to avoid you. So if you [do] service delivery, you need to be close to the government… If they avoid you for your advocacy work, it makes service delivery harder. We faced this when we had a grant on emergency response for HIV key populations. At the same time, we had a TB grant, and the TB [authorities] sided away from us because of our HIV work… we had to reduce our HIV work."

Another grassroots CSO had a similar experience, and explained "Under the [grant], they will tell you that you are not supposed to talk about human rights issues. And during our work, even when we are doing HIV programming, we meet a lot of challenges, which are really human rights violations. But even in our reporting, we are not supposed to talk about that. So I think that is one of our biggest challenges. We are not supposed to talk about human rights issues. The moment you start talking about that, especially this moment where the government is saying you have to register as a PVO and not operate as a trust, then you are assured that you are not going to be registered because of that. Because the moment you start talking about human rights issues in [this country], you are regarded as someone who is opposing the government that is sitting. And it's not a good way to have a relationship. You can even be taken off the grant. So that is a challenge for us."

Finally, while it did not emerge in the interviews, the literature found that conducting both advocacy and service delivery in humanitarian settings can be perceived as conflicting with principles of neutrality and independence, which may undermine access and trust. Furthermore, if service delivery is dependent on continued authorisation by the state or an armed group, then their ability to advocate will also be weakened – particularly if this advocacy is perceived as siding with opponents.[5]

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[5] Milasiute, G. (2023). Unfulfilled promises: Addressing the gap between commitments and practice in locally led humanitarian action. Brussels: Caritas Europa / Centre for Humanitarian Action. Link

Box 4: The impact of legislation

Legislation can influence an organisations' existence, as well as the role it plays. NGO laws can support or restrict an organisation's ability to register, receive funds, assemble, advocate or deliver services. One intermediary CSO stated "Often the registration is actually used as a cudgel to prevent free speech or organisation or certain types of work." However, CSOs' work can also be restricted by other legislation that affects the people they are working with. Most of the CSOs interviewed, for instance, work with communities whose behaviours, professions or identities are criminalised or not recognised by law, such as men who have sex with men, sex workers, and trans people, making their work potentially illegal, or at least unwelcome. One CSO interview shared that they were deregistered, then re-registered under a different name, but essentially moved the services they were providing underground. "Foreign Agents" laws also place restrictions on what CSOs can do, block access to funding, increase surveillance, or criminalise some types of partnerships and activities.

Advocacy tends to be more impacted than service delivery, but service delivery can still be impacted by reduced access to funding, additional compliance burdens, and greater risk. Grassroots organisations are disproportionately affected by these requirements than larger organisations because of their size and capacity. However, intermediary CSOs can also face additional reputational and coordination risks that can undermine coalition building and policy influence efforts. A table summarising some of these effects is presented in Annex 3.

Q4. Fostering local ownership and leadership

Learning Question 4. Which donor approaches to supporting local ownership and leadership within and through civil society organisations appear to be most effective? And which appear to be counter-productive?

There was significant alignment between the literature and interviews on this question, and the team heard several excellent examples of donor practices that support local ownership and leadership. These addressed both "what" type of support, and "how" that support can be provided. The key principles of best approaches were identified as:

- long-term, flexible, predictable funding
- support to organisational strengthening and leadership
- deliberate power-shifting to local organisations
- attention to enabling environment and localisation
- listening, mutuality and risk sharing
- convening and connection

Box 5: Localisation

For this report, localisation is defined as "the process of shifting resources, capacity, leadership, and decision-making power from the international or intermediary, to the local actor." This is in line with other definitions, including OECD DAC: "localising is understood as a process of recognising, respecting, and strengthening the leadership, ownership, and capacity of partner-country civil society actors in development co-operation, humanitarian action, and peacebuilding." (Link)

These practices are in line with the OECD DAC "three pillars" on enabling civil society in development cooperation and humanitarian assistance: 1) respecting, protecting and promoting civic space; 2) supporting and engaging with civil society; and 3) incentivising CSO effectiveness, transparency and accountability.[6] One donor interviewed cited OECD guidance as the benchmark used for developing its own procedures.

Unsurprisingly, the most cited practice that supports local ownership and leadership is long-term, flexible, predictable funding. Flexible in this sense means that it can be used to support both core functions and activities. Growing recent evidence demonstrate that long-term, flexible core funding is more effective than short-term, project-based funding in strengthening civil society organisations and improving the outcomes of aid investments.[7] Some donors and intermediaries spoke of trust-based relationships whereby they trust the partner organisation to understand their context, to know what solutions are needed, and how success should be measured. Sometimes grants are co-designed, which can be particularly effective if support also links to the broader ecosystem, rather than solely on the work of one organisation. The Robert Carr Fund engages in participatory sub-grant selection, where funding recommendations are made by a committee consisting of 50% donors and 50% civil society activists with expertise in the general context, allowing them to select grants based on the needs of the broader ecosystem.[8] The Other Foundation issues a call for peer reviewers to work together to select grants.[9]

Interviews also revealed a common shared practice of selecting grantees – both intermediaries or local partners – based on (a) their long-term strategies or larger purpose, and (b) their credibility and trust with their constituents. One donor also cautioned against a common donor practice of "picking winners" when awarding funding, which can risk

[6] OECD (2021), DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance, OECD/LEGAL/5021. Link

[7] For example: (1) OECD. (2023). Funding civil society in partner countries. Paris: OECD Publishing. Link. (2) Ihl, J., R. Singh, I. Malandu Mukali, H. Hede Skagerlind and A. Heucher (2025), The Effectiveness of Core and Earmarked Funding in Multilateral Development Cooperation – Systematic Review, DEval Discussion Paper 2/2025, German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) and Expert Group for Aid Studies, Sweden (EBA), Bonn, Germany. Link. (3) Raab, M., Bingen A. K., Cojocaru, G., Oliver, I. (2024) Evaluation of the CSO Core Support Programme in Moldova. Sida Decentralised Evaluation 2024:06 Sida, Stockholm. Link, and (4) Wiepking, P., de Wit, A., (2023). Unrestricted funding and nonprofit capacities: Developing a conceptual model. *Non-Profit Management and Leadership.* Vol 34:4. Pp. 801-824. Link

[8] https://robertcarrfund.org/funding/

[9] https://theotherfoundation.org/peer-reviewers/

reinforcing local elite power and excluding grassroots or politically sensitive actors. Some donors spoke of long and rigorous selection processes (particularly for intermediaries), but once a partnership was confirmed, that partner would be given significant trust and latitude. Others spoke of selection being done by regionally based donor staff familiar with the context and knowing what was needed and who was trusted. An important consideration then becomes that the support provided to a local partner reinforces, rather than undermines their legitimacy, and, as one donor stated, "ensure the organisation isn't distancing itself from its constituencies."

One donor shared that as part of the flexible funding, they now impose one condition on the otherwise unrestricted funding. "The restriction is that they need to use the percentage of the grant to strengthen their own organisation in the way they see fit. Because we have noticed that when we give completely unrestricted general support grants, people use them to deliver on their mission and don't set aside funding, whether to build reserves, whether to think about their communications or human resources, policies, etc.". Indeed, support for organisational strengthening emerged as an important theme, with a focus being on supporting an organisation to strengthen what they prioritise as important, rather than focusing on compliance. A particularly progressive practice heard from one donor was that a consultant is provided to a partner organisation to conduct an organisational capacity assessment, and these results are never shared with the donor: they are left with the partner to decide what they want to do with the results and are supported to strengthen as they see fit. In other conversations, the importance of training, long-term mentoring, coaching, and particularly peer-to-peer learning were all raised as valid approaches to capacity strengthening. This also linked with the donor's role as a convenor, to facilitate sharing and learning across partners. Practices such as these are both respectful of partners' existing capacity, and represent a shift of power to local organisations, where decision-making is shared.

In addition to bringing partners together for learning or other convening, donors can play a powerful role in creating opportunities for partners to be represented at spaces that they would not otherwise have access to. Donors can provide funding to cover travel expenses, facilitate visas, and or other support to bring partners to meetings to be able to speak for themselves. Donors can also help share or mitigate the risk that partners face on the ground in speaking truth to power. This may involve creating space for a partner to speak, reinforcing and reiterating partner messages, and providing (directly or indirectly) protection to partners at risk.

This last point speaks to a growing need to support not just organisations, but ecosystems. Some examples were shared of intermediaries supporting activists, as well as partners who can provide support to them when needed (e.g. medical or legal). This broader vision and coordination can take place at the donor level – and ideally not only within the development agency of the donor government, but across ministries through a coherent government agenda. Many also recognise the need for this coordination to take place across donors to ensure that the ecosystem is appropriately supported, that is, without gaps or duplication. This reinforces the need for long-term support (one donor spoke of 10 – 15 years), where donor support remains present through crises, and not only project cycles.

The role of intermediaries

The role of intermediary or sub-granting organisations was discussed in many interviews – particularly as most of the CSOs interviewed were intermediary organisations themselves, who also often worked with another level of intermediaries before support reached grassroots organisations. This may have resulted in an overly positive view of intermediary organisations, whereas the literature can identify limitations of this approach. At their worst, the document review[10] identified cases where intermediaries can serve as:

- **Gatekeepers**, limiting access to funds and/or capturing/diverting resources
- **Risk-shifters**, subcontracting without appropriate or sufficient support
- **Standard-setters**, enforcing INGO-centric systems and expectations
- **Powerholders**, dominating decisions and agenda-setting
- **Barriers to organisational strengthening**, due to short-term and inflexible funding
- **Agents of upward accountability**, eroding community-rooted approaches.

These represent the risks of working with intermediaries, however, interviews with donors and intermediary CSOs revealed extremely positive examples of the work of intermediaries, particularly when they adapt the same trust-based approaches outlined above, supported by the donor. Best practices of intermediaries that shift power and support local leadership that were identified in interviews include:

- **Transferring leadership** to local partners in program design and M&E
- Using **participatory governance** and grantmaking models.
- **Coordinating** with other INGOs to minimise burden and avoid duplication
- **Strengthening** long-term organisational and leadership capacities
- Acting as **connectors** to regional and global spaces
- **Enabling participation** of and support for movements and unregistered groups
- Providing **flexible** and core support during crises
- **Sharing** political risk.

The best practices observed demonstrated the principle of "power with, not power over," and these practices were required by some donors. One said, "We support CSOs in their own right… it's important that [the intermediary] plan together with the local CSOs, and that local partners are constantly part of the process, in consultations, monitoring, drafting reports, following results." Another shared that "Local partners provide the service, and the [intermediary] provides the space to participate in advocacy spaces and have a voice." This includes allowing supported partners to speak for themselves in larger forums. It was also noted that donors should aim for limited or no visibility in some spaces, meaning that branding requirements need to be aligned with promoting local leadership.

[10] See in particular: (1) Sabina Robillard, Teddy Atim, Daniel Maxwell. Localization: A "Landscape" Report. Boston, MA: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, 2021. Link. (2) CARE International. (2018). CARE International resource on civil society collaboration and partnerships. Geneva: CARE International. Link (3) Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) & Grand Bargain Caucus. (2022). Position on the Grand Bargain inclusion and accountability papers. Geneva: IASC. Link. (4) Milasiute, G. (2023). Unfulfilled promises: Addressing the gap between commitments and practice in locally led humanitarian action. Brussels: Caritas Europa / Centre for Humanitarian Action. Link.

One donor shared an inspiring example of observing partnerships organically evolve over time. In one country, "what we saw is that we had a phase where it was an international that is managing, that won the tender together with a local CSO. And now for the new phase, they switched the roles. So we have the national CSO which actually learned in the first four years, and is now taking the lead and they have the international INGO only as backstopping."

Donors have a significant role in influencing intermediary practices, particularly in terms of what they are and are not allowed to fund (e.g. unregistered organisations, social movements, or individuals), funding flexibilities, and in setting due diligence and reporting requirements. This allows intermediaries to be responsive to partner needs. One shared that "We help partners re-strategise under fire… when the context suddenly changes." Examples were also shared of when a movement did not want to receive money directly (e.g. due to lack of structure or not wanting to be seen as connected to a certain intermediary or donor, or other internal reasons) but needed direct support to cover costs. Convening was raised by both donors and intermediary CSOs as a critical role, with calls for broader groups to be brought together with a view to supporting networks and coalitions. "Convening is key… bringing together organisations, faith leaders, artists, activists." This requires both a flexible intermediary, and a flexible donor.

As with donors, intermediary CSOs also have an important role to play in coordination to avoid confusion and ease the burden on their grassroots partners. This includes coordination with other international NGOs where, as one intermediary CSO said, for example, "We actually divide ourselves at country level – who works on what, who funds what – to avoid duplication. We coordinate very closely." A donor reiterated the need for donors and intermediary CSOs to ensure that coordination begins at strategy development and does not stop at information sharing.

Donors are sometimes criticised for providing much of their aid budget to organisations from their countries, rather than to organisations in the countries and regions they are intended to support. Many simply do not have the bandwidth to grant to many CSOs directly, and provide the necessary level of support. Another reason for this emerged in interviews with both donors and intermediary organisations, being that "the [donor] partner can bring those issues to [donor] politicians, media and the public… the advocacy targeting [donor country] parliament, ministries and public must be done by [donor country] organisations." Keeping these issues in the donor country's mind can contribute to understanding of and support for the aid budget and agenda. Some intermediary CSOs expressed concern that in some donor countries there is a growing public perception that "we shouldn't spend so much on aid," and that this view could influence election results. There is also concern that "The [donor government] basically want to use aid as aid for trade or to reduce migration… this is not the solidarity perspective we should have." That is, some donors and CSOs see national partners as critical to engage in advocacy in donor countries to safeguard aid as a solidarity-based policy, particularly in the face of a global push-back on what were previously considered shared principles.

Some intermediary CSOs are holding themselves to high standards when it comes to

localisation. They recognise the risk of turning social movements into "small CSOs", and turning grassroots CSOs into copies of INGOs, which can undermine their link with and legitimacy in the eyes of their communities. One intermediary CSO also recognised that support is not always financial, but that flexibility also means recognising flexibility needed for staff hours, or recognising grassroots organisations' contribution to knowledge creation, and the value of mentoring and moral support. These intermediary CSOs recognise that supporting grassroots CSOs, social movements, activists and human rights defenders is messy – and that this will be further complicated as efforts are made to engage more deeply across the eco-system. The most effective intermediary CSOs are likely to be those who are willing to absorb and handle this complexity and minimise the risk and burden on grassroots CSOs.

Counterproductive approaches

For both donors and intermediaries, counterproductive approaches can be understood as the opposite of the progressive practices outlined above. Project-based funding was reported as the most counter-productive, resulting in team turnover and a subsequent loss of skills, institutional memory, and networks, as well as impeding an organisation to grow, strengthen, or become sustainable. The most regressive, or transactional practices are characterised by undermining local ownership, imposing donor agendas, structures and templates, and reinforcing external control. In practice, this may look like:

- Funding for short, tightly defined projects focused on service delivery or "activities" with little attention to power, politics or civic space.
- Local partners are treated as contractors implementing predefined results frameworks, divorced from their own strategy.
- Local organisations are consulted, but not co-designers.
- Decision-making, strategy development and risk management sit with donors and intermediaries.
- Little to no investment in organisational strengthening or this support focuses on compliance requirements.
- Limited or no flexibility to adapt methods when context changes.
- Funding primarily for easily measurable service delivery.
- Partners selected for compliance capacity rather than purpose.
- Administrative, reporting and co-financing requirements are heavy and standardised, regardless of partner systems or capacity.
- Narrow focus on outputs (activities, numbers reached) against pre-set, typically quantitative indicators.
- Innovation, responsiveness, creativity and learning is "killed by compliance."
- Donor branding requirements force civil society actors to align with a donor or detract from local visibility.

The team heard direct experiences of this. One group working with marginalised populations shared her relief of having the opportunity to discuss this issue. "You know, we have been dying. We have been dying as organisations at grassroot level to have someone who can listen to us. I can give you a very, very good example. Grants which

come out, like Elton John grants, you want to write a proposal, and you don't have the technical skills or all the resources to write that proposal. You approach a big organization, a big NGO… to say, can you help us? Can you provide technical support? And then they'll say no, we can partner with you guys to write this proposal. And you give them everything about what we want to do as a community, and you give them everything to an extent that you even give them peer educators from the community itself to go and map hotspots so that when we receive the grant, we can actually go to those hotspots. And you know what they do. You write the proposal, they send the proposal, the money comes, and they will tell you that the proposal was not successful. After two or three months, you see them implementing the same program that you have put down on the proposal. And you approach them and they will say, no, no, we work with who we want to work with. But we have found out that the moment they ask you, can you give us your community members so that they can come and work with us, they will then go to the donor and say, no, we have the community. And they are working. And they forget about you as a community-based organisation. They no longer want to work with you. This is what is happening at the moment… But they are forgetting that what they have put into their proposals is actually from us, the community. But we don't have a voice."

"We feel that people take advantage of us. They really take advantage. And we don't know the pathway to actually approach these big donors to say, guys, we at the grassroots level, if you don't support us, if you don't capacitate us, if you don't empower us, then if you give to these big organisations, you know, the bigger chunk is spent on administrations in those big organisations. The money which comes down at grassroots level to do programs which will actually change our lives, it's very little. So this is the challenge that we have."

Another example was shared of when a donor's policy priority did not take into account the community context, and while it achieved the intended objective, it put the affected communities at risk. "We rush to fund the end game rather than addressing root causes. Donors rush to fund decrim[inalisation], which happens in court, but you have to go back to communities to change attitudes and minds. You have to go to the community level before going to court. We need wins at the community level before going to court. When we talk about LGBT, the community thinks it's about marriage. The court may agree, but we have to go to the community to see how they will live with these people among us. Homelessness, conversion practices – this isn't thought about in decrim. Communities didn't feel engaged. When conversations happened, it was at the highest level – at the top of organisations. We need to build community systems that engage the lower level, as this is where the violence and commotion is. Donors don't think about this. They will talk about winning cases, but what happens when we win? We still have violence, the same issues, but they are more pronounced, there's more stigma – how can courts allow people to have these freedoms when they haven't looked at our community values? There's a disconnect between policy, communities – religious and cultural – and the LGTB community. We allow ourselves to work in silos. Donors are interested in the results, not the process."

The literature also supports the continued existence of these practices, and also mentions the risk that the "localization is being used by international intermediaries as a pretext for

transferring costs and risks to local actors, as opposed to establishing a meaningful sharing or shifting of power."[11] As one grassroots CSO put it, "Since localisation was accepted in [this country], it can be struggle for power between national and international organisations. But my perception is that it is actually a balancing of partnerships. Localisation has made national actors have the confidence. Because we're talking of transformation of confidence. We're moulded by INGOs. As we speak today – the existence of our organisation – [an INGO] had a hand. It's always good to go together and have a shared partnership. Local NGOs have knowledge of the context, wider reach in hard-to-reach areas, but INGOs and UN agencies have knowledge of donors and how best they can implement donor compliance. If we perceive this as a power struggle, we won't be able to access the remaining funding that's available."

Box 6: Priorities in the current context

What should donors be prioritizing in the current restricted funding environment when it comes to supporting grassroots CSOs?

"They need to prioritise three things. Firstly, restrict due diligence that they undergo. If an organisation has conducted due diligence with us, it shouldn't have to be repeated. They don't need to reduce the requirements, but the process shouldn't repeat. If an organisation has been assessed by INGO A, and there is a report, they should just use that and contact INGO B.

Number two is sharing risk and quality funding. What I mean by this is that they have to reduce retaining a lot of international experts that can take 50% of the grant as operational costs for the INGO. They can only remain with a few international expatriates and then work directly with national NGOs who have presence, have offices – they wouldn't have to rent, pay for R&R tickets, things that take a lot of money.

And thirdly, they also have to ensure donor compliance is revisited, and ensure that the capacity building of the national NGOs is considered and funded well, such that they are able to recruit expatriates to ensure smooth system of operations of the national organisation. This can make the system work well during this funding crisis. This can help sustain the number of INGOs and also make national NGOs lead the work. Because when you put little in the INGO and give a lot to national NGO, that covers bigger targets."

Source: Interview with a grassroots CSO

[11] Robillard, S., Atim, T., & Maxwell, D. (2021, December). *Localization: A "Landscape" report*. Feinstein International Center, Tufts University. Link

Q5. Monitoring and measuring change

Learning Question 5. How do donors and civil society organisations monitor progress towards the desired impact of fostering more democratic and rights-based societies?

Progress monitoring

Both the reviewed documents and conducted interviews converged around the importance of learning-centred, adaptive approaches to monitoring advocacy and civic space work. Most respondents made it clear that the focus of monitoring was for learning and communication, rather than compliance and accountability. Many respondents spoke of collaborative approaches in agreeing what success looks like and allowing that to change over time. Common monitoring methods mentioned included outcome harvesting, outcome mapping, contribution analysis, and narrative-based evaluations, such as most significant change or storying telling. Qualitative approaches were favoured to understand complex, non-linear change, focusing on changes in behaviour, discourse or narratives, visibility and relationships, rather than only on policy outcomes. There is also a recognition that advocacy outcomes are typically and can be contested, requiring flexible approaches to monitoring what success looks like and recognising contributions.

From interviews, donors and CSOs collect narratives around strategic objectives and identify key outcomes through stories and often triangulating different sources of information. One intermediary CSO shared their approach, which is light touch and comprehensive, bringing together perspectives from across the organisation. They begin by collecting narratives that demonstrate high-level progress against strategic plan objectives. This is supplemented by data analytics, such as from media monitoring, watch list updates, citations and project monitoring, which is done internally. This is then used to develop outcome stories, where colleagues discuss the project and contribute connections with other projects or spillover effects, as well as discussing specific outcomes that the partner experienced. "So it's quite a multi-layered storytelling process." The resulting annual report can then serve multiple purposes. Where possible, the CSO also attempts to work with donors to accept this one report and approach, rather than having to produce multiple reports at different times during the year.

Donors and intermediaries had different approaches to measuring result frameworks or strategies, but there is an understanding that the higher (outcome) level of a results framework is more important to monitor than the lower (output or activity) level. Some CSOs favoured tracking milestones rather than results. Some mentioned the need or desire to still measure some quantitative indicators, typically to demonstrate increased reach or mobilisation, but all agreed that numbers cannot tell the full story. One donor also mentioned following the DAC recommendation that "Providers can also create mechanisms for mutual feedback and identify indicators to assess the partnership itself."[12]

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[12] OECD (2024), *Shifting Power with Partners: Toolkit for Implementing the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance*, Best Practices in Development Co-operation, OECD Publishing, Paris, p. 17. Link

What is monitored varies across organisations, and types of organisations. The following table summarises the different focus of monitoring by the three types of organisations interviewed.

Table 1: Monitoring change

Type of organisation	Change monitored
Donors	• Credible progress toward democratic and rights-based change • Civic space trends • Policy influence • Organisational capacity and evolution • Organisational resilience and survival • Learning and adaptation
Intermediary CSOs	• Shifts in power, voice and agency of local actors • Strength and durability of networks and coalitions • Narrative and discourse change • Policy or practice change linked to advocacy • Risk and unintended consequences • Access to information • Access to funding
Grassroots CSOs	• Tangible changes in people's lived realities (including access to services and quality of those services) • Trust and legitimacy within the community • Behavioural change of public officials and service providers • Safety and protection • Survival and continuity • General contextual changes

Reporting and learning

The most progressive approaches to reporting were those that required minimal (e.g. annual) reports and did not impose a template. One donor, for example only required its partners to share three case studies that best demonstrated the impact they contributed to each year. This creates an additional burden on the donor to parse case studies of different formats, quality and level of detail – but the donor was willing to do this rather than pass additional burden and restriction to its partners. Other donors invest in organisational strengthening to help partners improve their reporting. Another intermediary reduces reporting burdens on grassroots partners by preparing reports on their behalf. This acknowledged that the parter was skilled at grassroots action and not set up for report writing, so it would collect information in a conversation with the partner and prepare the report to share with the donor. Another organisation is looking at the use of technology and AI to help partners prepare reports (e.g. prompts for completeness and translation). Another donor sees the value of providing a template, but a simple one: "We try to enable them to think through what they achieve… we don't prescribe formats… [but] simplified reporting should be given to grantees rather than expecting them to guess

what's needed."

One donor noted that "Results are rarely shown over 1–2 years… we ask for reporting on how they can report on the many years of collaboration." Another donor has done some impressive analysis of several years' worth of reports from grantees and has managed to map how work at the regional level can contribute to changes at the global level – and that those changes then trickle back down to the regional and national level to inform further action. This causal analysis then allows the donor to understand what is working, and to better understand how long-term change happens, and how regional and global levels interact and affect each other. Both donors and CSOs noted that learning accumulates over time, and that annual reporting may not sufficiently capture this without additional effort.

Nearly all interviews emphasised the importance of learning being the key purpose of monitoring, noting the risk that "compliance kills learning". As one donor said, "monitoring starts building conversation on evidence for change pathways." This could occur through building in organisation-wide reflection moments as data comes together. Intermediary CSOs also welcomed donor curiosity and willingness to have informal conversations to test ideas and learn together. One donor also values the views of movement actors to interpret results. "What I find most helpful… people within the movement holding each other accountable… they have intelligence about the real story, far more than any document will show." One donor also iterated the importance of being able to see what is happening on the ground "The approach to monitoring is, again, one of close proximity and relationship. So presence to the field is an important component of this… that's where you understand outcomes." Finally, examples were also shared of donors bringing grantees together to present and reflect on results and engage in peer-to-peer learning. These convenings often achieve more than this and nurture movement building, as addressed in learning question 4. This approach also ensures that monitoring and reporting is bidirectional and results in shared learning.

Sector-wide monitoring

"I think we have to be very humble in the sense that when we support civil society as actors in their own right, and they're operating in such a challenging environment, it's hard to expect that they will reform the system. Just having them still operating sometimes can already be a success." (Donor)

The interviews focused on monitoring funded partners and efforts, rather than sector-wide monitoring, which emerged only in the document review. While partner progress is often monitored qualitatively, sector-wide progress also includes quantitative measures. Some organisations have dedicated resources to this, such as the Civicus Monitor that tracks civic space, in terms of the protection of civil society's freedom of assembly, association and expression.[13] The EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society (EU SEE) also implements an Early Warning and Monitoring Mechanism, and in August 2025 began issuing Focus Country

[13] Civicus Monitor and Methodology Paper

Reports, which also draws on Civicus scoring.[14] The OECD DAC Toolkit promotes indicators that measure direct funding, leadership roles and enabling policies for local CSOs.[15] IATI financial transparency standards complement these by tracking who receives funding, how much, and through which intermediaries, allowing donors to monitor progress toward localisation and civic-space strengthening.[16] Other sector-wide measures found were V-Dem indices[17], Freedom House scores[18], SDG16 and some aspects of SDG17 indicators,[19] and the OCHA Financial Tracking Service[20].

While the literature included ways of monitoring progress in the sector, this typically occurred at a national level for global monitoring. Interviews noted the importance of monitoring progress at the local level. This included monitoring closing of civic space, linked with an early warning system – once again ensuring that monitoring is linked to learning and action.

Supporting CSOs, human rights defenders and social movements

Through the course of the interviews, the team noted that different good practices emerged in relation to supporting CSOs, human rights defenders and social movements. The following table summarises some of these differences.

[14] EU SEE Focus Reports
[15] OECD (2024) *op cit*.
[16] IATI standards
[17] V-Dem uses expert ratings to measure observable and harder-to-observe markers of democracy principles: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian. V-dem ratings
[18] Rates people's access to political and civil liberties in 208 countries and territories Freedom House scores
[19] SDG16: "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels" (see SDG16 toolkit). SDG17: "Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development", such as 17.9 (capacity building), 17.15.1 (country owned frameworks), 17.16 (multi-stakeholder partnerships) and 17.17 (resourcing partnership strategies). Link
[20] https://fts.unocha.org/

Table 2: CSO, HRD and SM distinctions

Review question	Intermediary CSOs	Grassroots CSOs	Human rights defenders (HRDs)	Social movements
1. Effective methods, activities and ways of working	• Provide organisational development, compliance support / management, convening and brokering between donors and others. • Combine advocacy, knowledge production and selective service delivery. • Act as backstoppers, mentors, fiscal hosts or re-grantors, translating grassroots priorities into donor and policy language.	• Community-rooted, trust-based and experiential approaches grounded in lived realities. • Use peer mobilisation, informal organising and identity-based leadership. • Combine rights-based service delivery with advocacy through testimony, community forums and local dialogue. • Effectiveness derives from proximity and legitimacy rather than formal systems.	• Documentation of violations, evidence collection, legal accompaniment and strategic litigation. • Often discreet, security-focused and individual or small-group driven; prioritise protection and visibility over scale.	• Mass mobilisation, protest, narrative change and decentralised organising through peer-to-peer networks. • Fluid, informal structures that resist hierarchy and formalisation.
2. Effective partnership models	• Formal partnerships, consortia, platforms and re-granting arrangements. • Act as brokers between donors and local actors and facilitate peer learning and coalition-building. • Most effective when power is progressively shifted and gatekeeping is avoided.	• Partnerships based on trust, accompaniment and mutual respect. • Often partner with intermediaries to access funding, or receive compliance support or protection, while retaining leadership on strategy and implementation. • Prefer partnerships that recognise uneven capacity and avoid extractive sub-granting.	• Protection networks, emergency support coalitions, confidential legal alliances and safe referral pathways. • Partnerships prioritise security and discretion over formality.	• Horizontal solidarity, informal alliances and regional or thematic movement ecosystems. • Partnerships emerge organically and resist over-formalisation and INGO leadership.
3. Complementarity	• Often combine both roles; service delivery and programmatic work can	• Service delivery often inseparable from advocacy: providing	• Primarily advocacy-focused; service delivery roles are	• Service delivery usually weakens or depoliticises

or tension between service delivery and advocacy	generate evidence and legitimacy for advocacy. • Risk of donor pressure to prioritise service delivery in ways that dilute advocacy or distort mandate.	services builds trust, legitimacy and constituency power. • However, visible advocacy can expose organisations to government retaliation that threatens service access.	usually irrelevant or risky. • Linking HRDs to service provision can endanger them or dilute mandate.	movement identity; separation of roles is often needed for legitimacy and mobilisation.
4. Donor practices that support or undermine local leadership	• Supported by multi-year flexible funding, clarity of role and trust-based relationships, and supported to risk share with grassroots CSOs. • Undermined when donors offload compliance and risk without appropriate resourcing, or push intermediaries into excessive sub-granting roles without clear localisation intentions and practices.	• Supported by direct engagement, flexible and small grants, core funding, funded capacity strengthening, risk-sharing through intermediaries, and joint decision-making. • Undermined by rigid compliance, donor branding requirements, repeated due diligence, extractive partnerships and being sidelined once ideas are absorbed by larger actors.	• Supported by rapid-response funds, unbranded and discreet funding, protection infrastructure and diplomatic backing when appropriate. • Undermined by visibility requirements, slow processes and forced formalisation.	• Supported by flexible, fast and non-intrusive funding; acceptance of informal structures; support to organising and narrative change. • Undermined by rigid MEL, branding requirements and co-optation of leaders.
5. Monitoring democratic and rights-based impact	• Outcome harvesting, contribution analysis, network mapping and strategic learning reviews, often drawing on partners' own MEL systems. • Emphasis on learning and adaptation rather than attribution. Ideally absorb reporting requirements of grassroots partners.	• Informal monitoring through community feedback, visible behaviour change, reduced stigma and participation in decision-making. • Prefer simple, narrative-based reporting and feedback loops over complex indicators.	• Monitoring focuses on safety, threats, protection outcomes, documented cases and legal results; confidentiality is paramount.	• Track mobilisation patterns, narrative shifts, public discourse and agenda-setting. • Monitoring is political, relational and often informal.

4. Conclusions

This knowledge mapping exercise comes at a critical time when civic space is under threat as authoritarian rises, and funding is shrinking. The donors and CSOs consulted during this exercise, in addition to large volumes of documentation, are a wealth of lessons learned and good practices. The key takeaways in terms of the most progressive approaches that donors can take to the learning questions can be summarised as follows:

1. Methods and ways of working

Investing in strong civil society is an end in and of itself and focusing on civil society survival and health are important goals at this time of shrinking civil space, anti-rights movements, and reduced funding. The most effective methods and ways of working are those that are designed by local actors, based on their knowledge of the context and that reinforces their relationships with their communities, with additional technical assistance where needed. Organising, mobilising, and constituency building emerge as foundational activities, that then enable advocacy to change attitudes, practices, policies or laws that are grounded in evidence and lived experience. That is, effectiveness appears to be less associated with specific activities, than with underlying ways of working that reinforce accountability to communities, work intersectionally, and sustain legitimacy.

This may require strengthening community systems and changing community attitudes before tackling broader legal changes – particularly in the face of growing backlash against human rights. While it is important to build on lessons learned on "what works", the current environment may require supporting approaches that are politically sensitive or experimental. Networked and collective action across movements, sectors, and increasingly across borders, are proving capable of strengthening resilience, motivation, solidarity, peer-to-peer learning and influence, particularly in the face of transnational repression. These emerging actors and new partnerships may propose initiatives that do not have an established evidence base, have unclear or unknown outcomes, and require a higher risk appetite or tolerance for ambiguity.

The current context is not evolving in a predictable or even way, and all actors recognise that changes associated with stronger democracy and human rights do not emerge linearly. Change emerges from adaptive, sometimes contested, and low-visibility forms of organising, influencing, solidarity, and advocacy. Interviewees described situations in which conventional project modalities and clearly defined outputs were ill-suited to their realities, and where maintaining space, ensuring the safety and security of actors, and experimenting with new alliances, requires flexibility, discretion and patience. Supporting this may necessitate a greater focus on learning than producing results.

2. Partnership models

The analysis shows that partnership effectiveness depends less on who the partnerships are between, but how they function. Effective partnerships are characterised by shared purpose, trust, power and resource sharing, and mutual accountability, where all partners

are contributing appropriately to their capacity, and have the opportunity to learn and grow. Participatory grantmaking and co-decision-making are positive models. These approaches can include consulting civil society peers on current priority areas or having a panel of experts review the context and recent changes, before assessing grants based on current needs. Participatory grantmaking would also involve local and national civil society actors in co-setting priorities, designing calls, selecting grantees and shaping the learning agendas based on context analysis. After grantmaking, some donors and intermediary CSOs convene partners to review and discuss data among peers, learn together, and then decide together on ways forward.

Interviewees emphasised the value of partnerships that recognise and leverage different strengths, such as grassroots legitimacy and local knowledge, different technical expertise, convening power or access to policy spaces. That is, the convening power of donors and intermediary CSOs is valued just as much as the resources they can provide. Leveraging partnerships effectively can require actively supporting invisible or marginalised actors through tailored mechanisms, not just funding registered NGOs. Some intermediary organisations are doing this through directly funding activities rather than groups, or who take care of reporting and compliance requirements rather than passing this on to grassroots partners. It may require closer accompaniment, capacity strengthening, or creating linkages with other actors and opportunities. This is an example of risk or burden sharing, that is also critical to building trust and ensuring effective partnerships. These practices also support localisation, where power is shifted to local actors to decide and act, and to do it in a way that protects them.

3. Service delivery and advocacy

Advocacy and service delivery can be mutually reinforcing when strategically aligned and context appropriate. Most of the donors interviewed see CSOs as political and social actors first, not as service providers. Yet CSO service delivery can complement longer-term rights and systems-change strategies, particularly where the evidence generated is used to shift policy, budgets or norms. Most grassroots CSOs, on the other hand, see service delivery and advocacy as highly complementary, as services allow them to show value to the community, building their legitimacy and credibility, both in the eyes of their constituents, and as advocates. Service delivery can help build trust and expand reach. Some grassroots CSOs mentioned service delivery was also a source of organisational survival.

However, tensions between the two roles can arise depending on the organisation's capacity and the context, as advocacy can make an organisation a target or subject to retaliation, reducing its ability to deliver services. In more restrictive or authoritarian contexts, it can be necessary for different services, and different advocacy to be conducted by multiple actors across the eco-system in order to spread the risk and burden. The need for this has been increased with the growth of restrictions on NGO registration and "foreign agent" laws. Other risks can include scope creep, overstretching limited capacities, changing the nature of the relationship with constituents, or create potential or perceived conflicts.

4. Local ownership and leadership

In short, donor approaches that are long-term, flexible, trust-based and oriented toward power-sharing are the most supportive of local ownership and leadership. The interviews and literature converged on the importance of predictable, multi-year funding that includes core support. This demonstrates trust in local partners' ability to know their own contexts and needs, and contributes to ensuring organisation survival, stability and strengthening, beyond the activities they implement. The pooled funding mechanisms interviewed (Robert Carr, FFM, the Other Foundation) demonstrated well-adapted approaches to granting that support local ownership, despite the challenge of needing to harmonise different donor requirements and expectations. While this happens at the international or regional level, one implication is that having pooled funds available at the national level may be a way to support an eco-system approach, based on an understanding of the national context, the needs, and the roles, contributions and capacity of different actors. This may also include funding more consortia who can collectively address structural issues. Critical to respecting local ownership is ensuring the transparency of the decision-making and resource allocation decisions.

Capacity strengthening remains critical to supporting local leadership; however, the focus is shifting to capacity sharing. That is, there is also growing recognition that previous models of a larger organisation "capacity building" a smaller organisation is no longer relevant, and donors and intermediary CSOs are also expected to adapt, learn, and change their systems based on feedback and guidance from grassroots partners. There are different thoughts on whether (a) grassroots actors should be institutionally strengthened to be able to manage more funds, or (b) intermediary CSOs should absorb the compliance and reporting requirements to allow grassroots actors to focus on their work. From the examples viewed, the latter is more appropriate for informal structures, however this choice appears to be one that should be co-decided by both the funder/intermediary and the grassroots organisation in line with the community's needs.

Data flows are increasingly seen as multi-directional. One-way reporting from grantee to donor is no longer optimal and reporting and information sharing is viewed as needed for more than accountability. Data can move up a chain for aggregation and further analysis and learning, and then this enhanced information can move back down for learning, adaptation and action. This adds value to grassroot partners' reports and contributes to learning and growth. This approach therefore both supports localisation by sharing information and the power to act, while connecting local actors to a broader network.

Finally, intermediary CSOs have an important role to play in either supporting or hindering local ownership and leadership. These relationships can be extractive and exploitative if they are not guided by the principles of trust and mutual respect, and a commitment to a shared vision, shared resources, risk, responsibility and roles. This includes practising listening and shared decision-making from design to evaluation. Donors can play an important role in setting these standards and expectations and holding intermediary CSOs accountable to these values and behaviours.

5. Monitoring and learning

Monitoring is most effective when it prioritises learning, reflection and adaptation, rather than compliance to a pre-defined set of activities or expected results. Most actors combine qualitative and narrative approaches to monitoring, and best practices demonstrate a participatory approach. The challenge with monitoring democracy and human rights is its context-specificity and non-linear nature. Similarly, outcomes tend to be constructed by multiple actors, reducing the usefulness of monitoring the outcomes of single organisations. In short, interviewees recognise the limitations of conventional indicator-based monitoring and results frameworks to capture change and are employing practices that aim to understand contribution rather than attribution. Donors, intermediary CSOs and grassroots CSOs all recognise there remains some value in quantitative indicators in some instances, but these cannot be used for decision-making.

Effective monitoring practices rely on qualitative methods such as outcome harvesting, case studies, storytelling, and participatory reflection. An example was heard of analysis conducted not just of data from one organisation, or one grant, but of an entire eco-system – from the national to the global level, which revealed previously unknown patterns that enhanced learning. Other donors and intermediary CSOs are seeing the value in bringing multiple partners together to share experiences and review data. This allows monitoring and measurement to be co-created with CSOs and other local actors, not only resulting in improved monitoring and measurement, but also contributing to strengthening local ownership. That is, monitoring is most meaningful when it is embedded in ongoing dialogue, peer learning and organisational reflection, and when donors demonstrate curiosity rather than enforcement.

Monitoring tends to focus on different levels of change, which is where having clear roles and focus for grassroots CSOs, intermediary CSOs and donors can be needed, to ensure that monitoring happens at the appropriate level. Grassroots organisations – depending on their reach and capacity – can be more focused on observed behaviour change by community actors (including local authorities), and in the lived experience of their constituents. They may also look at project implementation to see how they can adapt or improve their activities. Intermediary organisations may focus more on changes in organisational capacity, policy change, or shifts in the narrative or enabling environment. Donors may be looking at broader civic space trends across countries, or sector-wide monitoring, and overall progress towards democratic and rights-based change. All levels are important to monitor and bring together to enhance the understanding of the overall eco-system, as well to contribute to the learning of each of the actors in it.

Taken together, the findings of this knowledge mapping exercise highlight that strengthening civil society's contribution to democratic, and rights-based change requires approaches that are eco-system wide, political, and long-term. Civil society actors are operating under intensifying pressure, but relying on their resilience, innovation and solidarity cannot be the strategy. The evidence points to the importance of supporting civil society in its own right, in a way that fosters local leadership and ownership. This work also revealed the significant appetite for learning and a willingness to coordinate and move forward together.

Annexes

Annex 1. List of documents included in the document review

Technical guidance

OECD DAC-CSO Reference Group. (2021). *Enabling civil society: Tips, tools, insights, practices.* Paris: OECD.

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Milasiute, G. (2023). *Unfulfilled promises: Addressing the gap between commitments and practice in locally led humanitarian action.* Brussels: Caritas Europa / Centre for Humanitarian Action.

WACSI & AGNA/CIVICUS. (2021). *Civil society organisations' contributions to national development and post-COVID-19 rebuilding efforts in Ghana.* Accra: WACSI.

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Annex 2. List of people interviewed

#	Name	Role	Organizations	Email
	Donors			
1	Gunvor Bjerglund Thomsen	Program Officer, Department for Humanitarian Action, Civil Society & Engagement	Danida	guntho@um.dk
2.1	Susanna Nystrom	Program Officer	SIDA	susanna.nystrom@sida.se
2.2	Anne Lindeberg	Senior Program Manager & Advisor	SIDA	anne.lindeberg@sida.de
3	Benjamin Naimark-Rowse	Former Social Movements Advisor	USAID	naimarkrowse@gmail.com
4	Iva Dobichina	Senior Program Officer, Civic Engagement	Ford Foundation	i.dobichina@fordfoundation.org
5.1	Anja Dietrich	Program Officer	Robert Carr Fund	adietrich@robertcarrfund.org
5.2	Thea Khoury	Program Officer – M&E for Learning	Robert Carr Fund	tkhoury@robertcarrfund.org
6.1	Maria Christophersen	Senior Sector Officer - Civil Society	EEA-FMO	Maria.Christophersen@efta.int
6.2	Sotiris Laganopoulos	Senior Sector Officer - Civil Society	EEA- FMO	sotiris.laganopoulos@efta.int
7	Neville Gabriel	CEO	The Other Foundation	ngabriel@theotherfoundation.org
8	Pia Hänni	Head of the SDC Swiss NGOs section	SDC	pia.haenni@eda.admin.ch
8	Andreas Weber	Program Manager, Peace, Governance & Equality Section	SDC	andreas.weber@eda.admin.ch
	Intermediary CSOs			
9.1	Laurent Aldenhoff	Director of Development and Operations	Frontline Defenders	laurent@frontlinedefenders.org
9.2	Susanna Tuccio	Institutional Grants Manager	Frontline Defenders	stuccio@frontlinedefenders.org
10	Raafat Kamal	Senior Advisor, Organisation Development	ADRA Norway	lena.somme@adranorge.no
11.1	Beate Thoresen	Section Manager Civil Society Partnerships	NPAID	beatet@npaid.org
11.2	Magnus Flacké	Senior Advisor Civil Society	NPAID	magnusf@npaid.org
12.1	Anne Louise Carstens	International Director, Social Movements	Ms (ActionAid)	aca@ms.dk
12.2	Tim Whyte	Country Director, Denmark	Ms (ActionAid)	trw@ms.dk
12.3	Andreas Grarup Nielson	Social Movements Specialist	Ms (ActionAid)	ani@ms.dk
13.1	Mandeep Tiwana	Secretary General	Civicus	Mandeep.Tiwana@civicus.org
13.2	Francesca Alice	Advisor, Strategic Initiatives	Civicus	francesca.alice@civicus.org

	Grassroots CSOs			
14	Rodrick Mugishagwe	Acting Exec. Director	EANNASO (regional network of grassroots CSO)	mugishagwe@eannaso.org
15	Hakim Cipuounyuc	Executive Director	DARD (people with disabilities, women and children, South Sudan)	akotawur@gmail.com
16	Gumisayi Bonzo	Executive Director	Trans Smart Trust (trans and intersex, Zimbabwe)	bgumisayi@gmail.com
17	Lulu Nyenzi	CEO	Human Rights & Advocacy Centre (sex workers, Tanzania)	nyenzilulu@yahoo.com
18	Carolyne Njoroge	Program Coordinator	KESWA (sex workers, Kenya)	caroln170@gmail.com
19	Jeffrey Wambaya	Program Manager / Research Lead	ISHTAR (gay, bisexual, men who have sex with men, Kenya)	jwalimbwa15@gmail.com

Annex 3. Examples of impacts of NGO and "Foreign Agent" laws and policies

Legal instrument / type of law	CSO type most affected	Typical legal provisions	Consequences for advocacy work	Consequences for service delivery	Sources
Foreign influence / foreign agents registration laws	Advocacy-focused CSOs; rights-based and watchdog groups; intermediary NGOs	Mandatory registration if foreign funding exceeds a threshold; public labelling; detailed financial and activity reporting; enhanced inspections and sanctions	Strong effect on policy advocacy and public criticism; stigmatization as "foreign influenced" reducing legitimacy and access to policymakers; self-censorship in reports, campaigns, and coalition work	Indirect disruption through donor withdrawal, reputational damage, and administrative overload; some CSOs abandon sensitive services (e.g. legal aid, key population services) to reduce risk	Georgia Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence (2024) Link Russia Foreign Influence Law (2022, consolidated): Link
Foreign funding control laws (approval, caps, suspension powers)	Grassroots CSOs and national intermediary NGOs reliant on external funding	Prior approval or registration for foreign funds; suspension or cancellation of licenses; limits on administrative costs	Advocacy projects are often first to be defunded or denied approval; uncertainty discourages long-term advocacy strategies and coalition-building	High risk of service interruption when registrations are delayed or cancelled; increased compliance costs reduce funds for outreach and quality of care	India FCRA and 2020 amendments Link Ministry of Home Affairs FCRA portal: Link
Broad definitions of "political" or "public interest" activity	Grassroots CSOs; community-led monitoring and accountability groups	Vague bans or restrictions on political activity; regulator discretion in interpretation	Community advocacy, social accountability, and rights claims can be reclassified as illegal political activity; reduced space for community voices and lived-experience advocacy	Service delivery may continue but without accompanying rights-based or accountability components; CLM and feedback loops are weakened	Uganda NGO Act (2016) Link ICNL Civic Freedom Monitor Uganda: Link

Licensing, permits, and strong oversight by regulators	CSOs, INGOs, service-delivery implementers	Mandatory permits; discretionary renewals; inspections; suspension or dissolution powers	Advocacy becomes unpredictable and risky due to threat of suspension or non-renewal; reduced willingness to challenge authorities	Program delays, suspension of activities, and loss of staff; higher administrative costs reduce service coverage	Egypt Law No. 149 of 2019 (translation) Link
Mandatory disclosure of donors, partners, and beneficiaries	Rights-based CSOs; organizations serving key populations	Public disclosure requirements; audits with access to sensitive data	Reduced trust from communities and whistleblowers; advocacy on sensitive issues (HIV, SRHR, LGBTIQ+, migrants) becomes harder	Beneficiary protection risks, some services scaled back or anonymised, reducing reach and effectiveness	Russia Ministry of Justice foreign agents register (official entry point) Link
Asset freezing, dissolution, or criminal penalties linked to foreign agent status	Advocacy CSOs; independent media and watchdogs; some service NGOs	Criminal or administrative penalties; confiscation of assets; forced dissolution	Near-total shutdown of independent advocacy and civic oversight; exile or underground operation of activists	Abrupt termination of essential services, including health, legal aid, and humanitarian assistance	Nicaragua civil society crackdown overview (Human Rights Watch) Link
"Transparency" laws later struck down by courts, but replaced by new controls	Advocacy NGOs; policy research organizations	Labelling and reporting obligations justified as transparency or sovereignty	Even temporary enforcement creates long-term chilling effects and reputational damage; legal uncertainty discourages advocacy investment	Service delivery often survives but becomes more projectized and depoliticized	EU documentation on Hungary case and aftermath Link Legal analysis: Link

Note: this table was generated with the help of AI and has been verified by the team by correlating it with other evidence.

Annex 4. Examples of donor indicators

Donor	Main Indicators / Measurement Focus	Sample indicators	Source (with working link)
Sida (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency)	• Sida's civil society portfolio tracks support to democracy, human rights and freedom of expression. • Emphasises support *in its own right* and aims for long-term predictable funding. • Specific indicator sets are internal, but the portfolio documents reflect outcomes like increased accountability, civic space, and sustained CSO capacity.	• Increased participation by civil society in decision-making processes • Strengthened accountability of public institutions • Sustained civic space and freedom of expression outcomes • Evidence of policy influence and legislative change facilitated by CSOs.	Sida Civil Society Portfolio (2024) Link Sida thematic area page Link
SDC (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation)	• SDC's *Governance Guidance* emphasises strengthening active citizenship, institutions and human rights, and applies governance & human rights indicators consistent with Switzerland's International Cooperation Strategy. • Uses *aggregated reference indicators (ARI) and thematic reference indicators (TRI)* to monitor strategy implementation including governance objectives.	• Civil society engagement in public policy processes • Inclusiveness and participation in decision-making • Human rights norms integrated into national policy frameworks.	SDC Governance Guidance: Link SDC Monitoring & Reporting: Link
Danida (Denmark's Ministry of Foreign Affairs)	• Danida generally aligns its results frameworks to the Danish Strategy for Development Cooperation, where democracy and human rights are central. Specific CSO indicators are usually integrated into country and programme results frameworks (e.g., increased civic participation, rule of law benchmarks), but there is no single consolidated public list for CSO-focused indicators.	• Increased civic engagement and participation • Strengthened rule of law and human rights frameworks • Improved legal protections for vulnerable groups • Evidence of policy or institutional reforms.	Danida official website Link

Robert Carr Fund (RCF)	• Utilises project-level results indicators negotiated with grantees focusing on expanded civil society space, capacity, policy influence, and inclusion of key populations in domestic and regional arenas. • The Fund's annual reports include aggregated outcome summaries across these dimensions.	• Enhanced civil society space at national/regional level • Policy influence and legislative change led by key population CSOs • Strengthened organisational capacity of partner CSOs • Inclusion of key populations in governance processes.	Robert Carr Fund: Link
The Other Foundation	• Focuses on LGBTI human rights, equality and inclusion outcomes. Indicators include legal reform achievements, reduced discrimination incidents, strengthened organisations, and regional influence. – Detailed indicators are typically in annual results frameworks or evaluation reports.	• Legal reforms protecting LGBTI rights • Reduction in discrimination and violence against LGBTI people • Strengthened organisational and leadership capacity within LGBTI movements • Increased engagement in regional human-rights forums.	The Other Foundation: Link
EC Financing Mechanism Office (European Commission)	• The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) uses a results framework with indicators such as increased civic space, legal protections, participation of civil society, access to justice and rights-holder empowerment.	• Number of EIDHR supported projects aligned with EU human rights guidelines • Number of human rights victims or vulnerable groups benefiting from EIDHR projects • Percentage of partner countries showing improvement on democratic indicators (e.g., V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index) • Outputs related to electoral observation, legislative reform support, rights-holder empowerment.	EIDHR framework: Link

Note: this table was generated with the help of AI and requires further review and verification before it can be used as a reliable reference.