



Case No. 2502693

OUR SHARED DESTINATION: getting there, together

**Report on the Phase II Norad Knowledge Mapping
Consultations with development partners and civil
society organisations.**

Prepared by Health Management Support Team (HMST)

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1. Background

In 2025, Norad, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation under the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, invited HMST to inform a strategic reflection by the agency on its work to strengthen civil society that builds democracy and advance human rights through official development assistance in low- and-middle income countries. Through that exercise, Norad aimed to better understand the current global development context and to improve the relevance and effectiveness of Norwegian support to civil society strengthening.

Phase 1: Knowledge mapping

In Phase 1 of the process, in 2025, HMST facilitated a Knowledge Mapping exercise, conducting literature review across over fifty documents – including strategy and policy documents, programme reports, and other resource documents and reference material – and conducting interviews with representatives from intermediary organisations (largely Nordic civil society organisations that receive funds from Norad to sub-grant to partners in low- and middle income countries), with grassroots organisations implement local and national activities in their respective countries, and with other donor organisations (bilateral development agencies and private philanthropic foundations). Interviews explored several learning questions around good practice methods and approaches to building democracy and civil society; about effective models for partnership, coalition-building and collaboration; around the complementarity and tension between service delivery and advocacy modalities; about effective donor practices to promote and elevate local leadership; and around measuring and reporting on the impact of development assistance.

Findings and observations from Phase 1 informed “*Knowledge Mapping on Strengthening Civil Society*”, a report developed by HMST and presented to an internal Working Group to inform the agency’s broader reflective exercise.

An invitation to conversation

Phase 2 of the process included, in January 2026, a series of follow-up convenings with the donor groups, intermediary civil society organisations and grassroots organisations whose input informed the development of the Phase 1 report. These online consultations aimed to offer summary feedback to respondents around the findings of Phase 1, to test observations and conclusions with respondents and invite their validation or correction, and to invite further insights and reflections around emerging themes. In this round of conversation, select members of the Norad Working Group joined as interested listeners and learners to resource their own understanding of the process and issues.

2. Process

Convened and facilitated by HMST on the 22nd and 23rd January 2026, each of three convenings:

- invited participants to introduce themselves by name, geographic location and organisation.
- provided background context for the overarching reflective intention by Norad, and the Phase 1 Knowledge Mapping exercise by HMST.
- presented summary findings and observations as represented in the Phase 1 Knowledge Mapping report.
- invited responses from participants to the summary findings.
- prompted discussion and participant contribution around several emerging themes relevant to the future responsiveness, relevance and effectiveness of Norad's development assistance approach.
- confirmed Norad's commitment to ongoing, iterative consultation and conversation with partners as the process continues over time, in the spirit of inclusiveness, transparency and accountability.

3. Resonance

Following the presentation of the high-level findings and observations from the Phase 1 report, convening participants reflected a strong sense of resonance. Findings offered nuance, not novelty, and participants felt reassured that these familiar themes and insights confirmed and reinforced their own experiences across diverse contexts. Specifically, participants appreciated:

- that the Knowledge Mapping exercise and the broader reflective exercise conducted by Norad occur at a time when many organisations – donors and intermediary organisations – are conducting similar analytical and strategic processes, exploring similar questions on development philosophy and approach.
- the language, framing and concepts reflected in the report – inclusiveness; partnership; localisation – that reflect the spirit and culture necessary for meaningful development cooperation between human beings who are equal in dignity and rights, even if not equal in resource and liberty. Local actors who receive international development assistance to lead change in their own settings are partners, not contractors.

- the constructive provocation around concepts of partnership – and particularly how this defines the role and practice of intermediary organisations and their relationships with local organisations – and power in development assistance.
- that the findings candidly engage with the disconnects that may exist between commonly agreed principles of equitable development (transparency; inclusive governance; fair resource sharing; local leadership; etc.) and practical application of those principles where development activities are supported through partnerships.

4. Insights

Building on the findings and observations from the Phase 1 report, participants engaged further with prominent themes and questions emerging from that analysis of appropriate, effective development assistance, cooperation and partnership. The following insights emerged:

1. **Optimal development partnership is responsive to local partners and to local context.** Responsiveness is a function of:
 - a. **agility**, the capacity of funding partners and funding mechanisms to react and to relate rapidly to a dynamic, often volatile environment for civic action and human rights. Bureaucratic processes to develop policies, strategies and structures for multi-year commitments – often with good intentions that reforms increase efficiency and effectiveness – can “miss the moment” and quickly lose relevance if they are outstripped by the pace of change in the developing environment.
 - b. **flexibility** that allows for adaptivity and improvisation, based on local conditions, in the ways development funding is applied (activities) and in the ways funding is managed (activities).
 - c. reasonable **proportionality** that does not impose standards and requirements for administration of grants and for governance that are disproportionately high compared to the value of the grant, and are unrealistic and difficult to achieve in the sociocultural, political or organisational (systems, structures, etc.) context of the grantee. What might be the lightest, simplest requirements for compliance and due diligence?
 - d. **pragmatism**, allowing local partners sufficient flexibility to apply funding to address and/or solve practical problems.
 - e. **relationship, proximity and negotiation** in partnership that navigates all parties towards a shared destination, a set of common interests, together.

2. in the work of democracy-building, citizen action and human rights advocacy, activist typologies are expanding and evolving. Catalytic youth-led social movements for citizen-driven change – often with high-impact results – are not necessarily the conventional structured, professionalised non-governmental organisations with systems, policies, procedures that are palatable to traditional donors. **New forms of organised civil society in developing contexts require transformed mechanisms from development partners** that provide for:
 - a. **identification** of nascent organisations, and constituency-based organisations that are evolving to become less informal and more organised.
 - b. **relationship-building** over time to increase proximity to the people and their work.
 - c. the integration of resources for **safety and security** of civic actors vulnerable to social and political reprisal.
 - d. different, **innovative approaches to accompaniment, mentoring and support** for refining vision and strategy, and for building organisational competence.
 - e. capacity strengthening through **organisational development**.
 - f. organisational stability and continuity through **flexible, unrestricted core funding**.
3. **Coordination and connection of actors** – for example, Norwegian civil society organisations that are intermediary organisations supporting development initiatives – is beneficial for harmonisation, alignment, distribution of roles and functions, strategy and collective assessment of the current development landscape.
4. **Intermediary organisations – many that are Norwegian civil society organisations supporting local partners in developing settings – have many valuable roles** beyond being primary a channel for funding, including:
 - a. **facilitating introductions, linkages and referrals** to other resource organisations, and verifying/legitimizing local organisations to vouch for their credibility where necessary.
 - b. **support to building or strengthening alliances and networks** amongst grassroots organisations operating in the same local or national (or regional) civil society ecosystem, to increase cohesion and cooperation,

and offset fragmentation and polarisation that erode the strength and solidarity of civil society.

- c. **strengthening the organisational capacity of local partner organisations** to increasingly receive, absorb and administer direct funding.
 - d. **creating opportunities for inclusive governance** by ensuring communities are meaningfully represented on organisational boards, and participating in grant-making and programme design.
 - e. **coordination** with similar peer intermediary organisations and back-donors (e.g. bilateral mechanisms) to pool funding, to scale support to effective interventions, and to increase efficiency.
5. **It is possible to conceptualise and to articulate novel results (indicators and impacts) of effective civil society strengthening and democracy-building that are both unconventional and measurable.** Results could include, for example:
- a. the continued existence (**durability; stability**) of civil society organisations; that they remain, and continue to operate, despite challenging circumstances that threaten their survival and presence.
 - b. evidence of **adaptability and resilience** by civil society organisations that apply creativity and innovation to respond to changes in their environment and to absorb and overcome threats.
 - c. **connection and cooperation** between civil society organisations coordinating together in networks and alliances as a sign of the vitality of a broader civil society ecosystem.
 - d. **coherence** in the ways civil society organisations have managed to form relationships with influential stakeholders and institutions – governments, civil society, multilaterals, bilateral partners, etc. – and increase their relevance by aligning agendas.
 - e. incremental, progressive **organisational development** of civil society partners that, amongst other effects, increase their capacity to receive and administer direct funding.
6. **Strong civil societies benefit from vibrant, vital, supportive civic ecosystems that are rich, complex and multi-organisational,** not isolated. Networks, coalitions, alliances are an effective strategy for strengthening civil society and amplifying civic voice provided that:
- a. the network is **authentic**, not artificially contrived or assembled opportunistically to qualify a group of unaligned organisations for resources.

- b. the network structure is an asset, a resource, that helps people **organise** themselves together to respond to a common cause. Organising, movement-building and response – not structure – are the primary aims of the network.
 - c. it **adds value**; that members of the network are more effective and stronger together than they would be individually and independently.
 - d. members of the network are adequately **aligned** around similar concerns, and with similar objectives.
 - e. investments of time, relationship and resources are made in building network **cohesiveness**, in co-design and co-creation of the network's vision, values and practice.
7. **Anxieties about and perceptions of resource scarcity in the civil society ecosystem can lead to competition between peer organisations** in the local context, and to **discrepancies in power** between local organisations and intermediary organisations. These unhealthy dynamics undermine the vitality, integrity and resilience of civil society as a foundation for development and social justice. Development partners like Norad have a responsibility for vigilance – and adequate proximity to grantees at the local level that informs reasonable situational awareness – to:
- a. reduce the effect of resource availability and development support to stir divisive competition.
 - b. ensure **equitable** representation and visibility, and access to opportunities, resources, information and participation (in, for example, civil society networks) for small and emerging organisations that may be marginalised or excluded by more established organisations (indigenous, intermediary or international) that dominate the civil society, development or service delivery space.
 - c. promote principles and practices of **fairness**, and protect small community organisations from exploitation and instrumentalisation (where, for example, community organisations are asked to mobilise community members for activities and functions that ultimately attract resources to other organisations who do not share those resources with the community; or where community organisations are the functional implementers of activity but receive disproportionately small resources compared to the partner administering a grant or managing a project).
 - d. monitor that relationships and behaviours between intermediaries and grassroots organisations conform to agreed principles of equitable

development that are supportive of **local leadership**: transparency; consultation; joint decision-making; flexibility; etc.

- e. provide a mechanism through which community organisations (who may be sub-grantees of intermediary organisations) can have **relationship and communication** – to independently represent themselves, and characterise their experience – with back-donors who are investing in their development through the action of intermediaries.
 - f. include local partners in the selection of intermediaries – building **democratic process** into the architecture of how development assistance is operationalised – and in the periodic assessment of those intermediaries for suitability to community partners.
8. **Donor organisations – either bilateral, private foundations or philanthropies – can deploy a range of alternative approaches to increase equity in the exercise of development assistance**, consistent with commonly agreed principles of good partnership, including:
- a. **pooled funding mechanisms** that allow donors to receive one consolidated report from multiple grantees, reducing the reporting burden on grantees, and the administrative burden of review by donors.
 - b. calls for proposals that require **joint applications** from partners in the global North and the global South to encourage collaboration, to promote recognition and appreciation of diverse strengths and experience, and to combine procedural and technical capability with contextual expertise for stronger development outcomes.
 - c. **dual-track funding models** that may offer competitive calls for short-term development project activities, alongside longer-term core support, recognising that strong civil society requires both programmatic and institutional capacity.
 - d. **alternative application formats**. Requesting the internal planning documents of an organisation over a standard proposal written specifically in response to a donor-initiated call for proposals can provide more authentic insight into the character, legitimacy and experience of a potential partner while reducing application burden.