

One Year On: COVID-19 has made CSOs' effectiveness harder on many fronts

A CPDE ICSO study on the impact
of the pandemic

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1 – INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 and many of the responses to it have created unprecedented challenges in terms of the devastating scale and nature both of the health crisis and its secondary social and economic impacts. This in turn poses fresh challenges for sustainable development. When the need is now greater than it has been for decades, developing countries face an estimated \$1.7 trillion USDs shortfall on the sums required to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 as a result of the pandemic. This is on top of an existing \$2.5 trillion USD gap in annual financing for development.¹ The Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC) joined calls for an effective response to limit the human and economic costs, and achieve a sustainable recovery that leaves no one behind.²

This report offers a snapshot from the point of view primarily of International Civil Society Organisations (ICSOs) of the global pandemic's far-reaching effects, one year on, on this constituency's ability to play its part, seen through the lens of the development effectiveness agenda. The aim here, therefore, is to highlight the main impacts on CSOs' ability to operate effectively in order to help the ICSO constituency group, and the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) as a whole, pinpoint next steps for more in-depth research and/or action to support CSOs in implementing their development effectiveness principles more fully in these most challenging of times. Initiated by the ICSO constituency group of the CPDE, it forms part of the activity framework of the CPDE.

It outlines the main impacts identified by study participants, including the challenges caused by an increasingly hostile environment for CSOs to operate in and serious funding constraints for all, but particularly for national CSOs. It then examines in more detail how the pandemic and responses to it have affected ICSOs' ability to implement key areas guiding the effectiveness of their operations. This exposes some major difficulties created by the pandemic for CSOs' capacities to promote core areas, such as human rights and social justice and women and girls' empowerment, and to meet their commitments in practice to people's empowerment, democratic ownership and participation and pursuing equitable partnerships with national and local CSO partners. It also presents some positive developments, notably an increased appreciation for CSOs and the causes they espouse and multiple opportunities through digitalisation. It examines these against the backdrop of major trends in international development that were either heightened during the pandemic or emerged in the midst of it.

This report also builds on a number of previous studies, namely: “*Civil Society Initiatives on Covid-19*,” a report, which details the results of a survey undertaken by CPDE just a few weeks into the pandemic to better understand how the pandemic was affecting CSOs at that time;³ a study from 2016, a self-assessment of the level of support from the INGO community for the development effectiveness agenda, “*How Effective are International Non-Governmental Organisations? A study of INGO support of the development effectiveness agenda*”⁴ (hereafter, ‘the CPDE ICSO 2016 study’); and a follow-up working paper from 2019, “*Accelerating the Implementation of the Istanbul Principles by INGOs in a Changing Development Landscape*”⁵ (hereafter, ‘the CPDE ICSO 2019 study’), which looked at the areas of development effectiveness that have been most challenging for INGOs to implement, and contextualised these against major trends affecting INGOs at that time.

¹ OECD, *Global Outlook on Financing for Sustainable Development 2021: A new way to invest for people and planet* (9 November 2020). <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/e3c30a9a-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/e3c30a9a-en>

² GPEDC, *COVID-19 Global Pandemic and New GPEDC Workplan*, Statement by the Co-Chairs of the GPEDC (12 May 2020). <https://www.effectivecooperation.org/content/co-chairs-statement-covid-19-pandemic-and-new-work-programme>.

³ CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE), *Civil Society Initiatives on Covid-19*. (19 June 2020). <https://csopartnership.org/2020/06/results-of-cpde-survey-on-civil-society-initiatives-on-covid-19-out-now/>

⁴ Liz Steele, *How effective are International Non-Governmental Organisations? A study of INGO support of the Development Effectiveness agenda*, CPDE (2016), <https://csopartnership.org/resource/cdpe-ingo-report-2016/>

⁵ Costanza De Toma, *Accelerating the Implementation of the Istanbul Principles by INGOs in a Changing Development Landscape*. CPDE (April 2019), <https://csopartnership.org/resource/cpde-icso-guidelines-paper/>

2 - METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study, based primarily on personal reflections shared in interviews. Participants were mainly from ICSOs, platforms and membership networks, working in diverse roles (covering policy, programmes, research, monitoring, evaluation & learning (MEL) and network coordination functions) and based in both the Global North and South.

The research took place during February and March 2021, and comprised an online survey circulated among about 700 CSO stakeholders in February 2021, to which there were twenty one (21) respondents from INGOs, regional and national platforms and membership networks, and national CSOs. There followed twelve (12) semi-structured interviews carried out between 24 February and 8 March 2021. The interviews involved sixteen (16) people from eleven (11) organisations. Interviewees provided their information anonymously and so this has not been referenced in the text of the report. The survey and interviews were supported by a desk-based literature review, including a number of materials recommended and shared by the research participants. A research Peer Review Group of four expert ICSO representatives was also established to review and provide feedback on the interview questionnaire and draft report.

3 - LIMITATIONS

- » It is a snapshot based on the personal reflections of a small number of participants, covering the areas of development effectiveness that are relevant to their respective areas of expertise and operation. As such, it offers useful and important insights, but cannot be interpreted as a fully comprehensive evaluation of the impact of the pandemic and/or State and donor responses to it on the sector's ability to operate effectively.
- » The contribution of each participant reflected their own perceptions and experiences and so cannot be interpreted as the official position of the organisations they represent.
- » The research was commissioned by the ICSO constituency of the CPDE, and ICSO representatives formed the majority of the research participants, so there is inevitably a bias towards that perspective in this report.

4 – BACKGROUND

4.1 – The COVID-19 pandemic

Following its initial outbreak in Wuhan, China towards the end of 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the highly infectious coronavirus, COVID-19, a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. One year later, the world has witnessed the stark effects of this global health crisis: the virus has claimed more than 117 million confirmed cases and over 2.6 million deaths,⁶ and counting.

The economic and social effects caused by the pandemic have arguably been more devastating than the threats to life and health from the virus itself. These have exacerbated underlying structural issues that were entrenched long before COVID-19. While the pandemic has impacted all corners of the globe, the secondary effects have been felt most acutely in the Global South. It is estimated, for example, that 150 million people could be pushed into extreme poverty by 2021, reversing twenty years of progress.⁷ Within populations, the vulnerable and marginalised have also suffered most of all, giving rise to a 'pandemic of inequality'.⁸ Reports abound as to how different social, ethnic and economic groups have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic's primary and secondary effects: women and girls,⁹ indigenous peoples, people living with disabilities, and people in conflict and fragile settings. The list goes on. Many of these identities intersect and overlap of course too, so compounding the discriminatory effects of the pandemic.

4.2 – How CSOs responded to the pandemic

CSOs, despite facing multiple challenges themselves, were quick to respond to the crisis. The first, immediate 'emergency phase' centred on the health emergency and meeting basic needs. This was followed by a second phase, focusing on the more complex secondary effects and deep-rooted structural issues, be that food insecurity and malnutrition, the loss of livelihoods or domestic violence.

Whether it was part of their mandate or not, many CSOs provided food, personal protective equipment, and essential sanitary items. They also disseminated information about how people could protect themselves from infection or seek medical help when they were unwell. Where at all possible, they sought to engage with governments and local authorities to best target and coordinate their responses. They supported rights holders with legal redress and essential services, where movement and physical distancing constraints allowed. They also led and participated in research, advocacy and campaigning to throw light onto the causes, effects and responses needed to combat the crisis and tackle its worst effects.¹⁰

⁶ WHO Coronavirus dashboard: <https://covid19.who.int>, (accessed 11 March 2021).

⁷ World Bank, *COVID-19 to Add as Many as 150 Million Extreme Poor by 2021*, Press release (7 October 2020). <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/10/07/covid-19-to-add-as-many-as-150-million-extreme-poor-by-2021>.

⁸ CPDE, *Civil Society Initiatives on Covid-19*, *supra* note 3.

⁹ See: UN Women, *Impact of Covid-19 on Violence against Women and Girls and Service Provision: UN Women rapid assessment and findings*, (2020). <https://www.unwomen.org//media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/impact-of-covid-19-on-violence-against-women-and-girls-and-service-provision-en.pdf?la=en&vs=0>; CARE, *COVID-19 Could Condemn Women to Decades of Poverty: Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women's and Girls' Economic Justice and Rights*, (April 2020), https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_-_Implications_of_COVID-19_on_WEE_300420_1.pdf; Concord, *EU global response to COVID-19: Forging a path to an equitable future*, Policy brief (May 2020) <https://beta.concordeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/06/EU-global-response-to-COVID-19-Forging-a-path-towards-an-equitable-future-1.pdf>.

¹⁰ See, for example: CPDE, *Civil Society Initiatives on Covid-19*, *supra* note 3; CIVICUS, *Solidarity in the Time of COVID: Civil society responses to the pandemic*, (November 2020) https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2020/solidarity-in-the-time-of-covid-19_en.pdf; Bond UK, *12 Ways NGOs are Helping the World's Poorest During Covid-19*, (9 June 2020). <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2020/06/12-ways-ngos-are-helping-the-worlds-poorest-during-covid-19>; Civil Society Platform for Peace-building and State-building (CSPPS), *Fighting Covid-19, Building Peace: A civil society perspective*, (13 July 2020) https://cspps.org/files/2020-07/CSPPS_Fighting_COVID19_Building_Peace_Report.pdf; World Vision, *100 Days On: COVID-19 emergency response*, (30 July 2020) https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/World%20Vision%20COVID-19%20Emergency%20Response%20100%20Days%20On_fnl.pdf.

5 - MAIN IMPACTS FOR CSOs

Interviewees were asked what the primary impacts of the pandemic had been on their ability to function effectively, either externally or internally. The areas that participants mentioned most were: the limitations to their operating environment caused by the sheer scale and complexity of the problem, although this did also draw greater attention to the need to address key structural issues; the increasingly hostile environment faced by civil society, as well as restrictions exercised by States to stem the spread of the virus; digitalisation had both major benefits and drawbacks; and funding remained a key challenge that the crisis heightened further. Finally, the effects of the pandemic took a toll on CSO staff personally too, although many were proud and pleased that “they were there.”

5.1 – Limitations to CSOs' operating environment

a. The scale and complexity of the problem

Most of those participating in the study understandably appeared to have been deeply affected by the unprecedented scale and complexity of the crisis, particularly the secondary impacts:

“I think it's fair to say some of [the work we have been doing on strengthening entrepreneurship, women workers and dignified work] collapsed overnight without any safety nets for those workers depending on which sector they were in. I recall [...] Bangladesh garment factories and one million job losses in a week. It was huge. Devastating.”

Although at the same time, most interviewees noted that this had at least shone an unavoidable “spotlight” on the many structural issues that civil society had been campaigning on for years. There was “an awakening” as authorities and the general public alike could now see clearly how critical it was to address these issues:

“That is why we need these services to be there because when you have them you are in a position to address the pandemic. All these inequalities we have been raising in terms of gender, in terms of income, in terms of the precariousness of work. [The pandemic] brought home the messages we have been making.”

Both survey and interview participants believe that the critical work that CSOs have been doing has led to a greater appreciation for CSOs among local communities, and in those governments too that welcomed the support and partnership from CSOs in response to the crisis:

“When you needed something, who came to help you? It's more visible, maybe, people understand better that civil society is there for them.”

Moreover, a number of participants commented that working together towards a single goal in these challenging circumstances had galvanised staff, and brought them closer together than ever before.

b. Shrinking civic space under the guise of emergency measures

“We have many partners and allies, CSOs from the grassroots, who are actually red-tagged and targeted by the Government. So that's a real threat. And even for international CSOs – we have been red-tagged by the Government. It's dangerous [...], members of organisations or CSOs have been murdered.”

The crisis has provided the “perfect cover” for repressive governments to crack down on fundamental freedoms and entrench their positions further (see Box 1). Indeed, all of the interviewees raised this as a major factor severely limiting CSOs' ability to speak out or otherwise operate freely and effectively. CSO representatives have themselves been threatened by State authorities and are “fearful.” Serious concerns were expressed for the safety and security of network members and national CSO partners. One interviewee mentioned cases of raided offices and frozen bank accounts. Another interviewee stated that humanitarian workers had been denied entry to entire regions even though people there needed food to survive.

A number of governments according to the survey and interviews also refused to engage with CSOs or share key information.¹¹ This included cases of democratic governments with a good record of CSO engagement previously. In one example, information had been withheld or delayed, CSO engagement had been blocked, and decisions had been reached behind closed doors “*under the guise of extraordinary times.*”¹²

Nor were governments the only actors to clamp down during the pandemic. One participant commented on rising incidences of workplace repression generally, citing cases of employers forcing employees to go to work, not providing protective equipment, or even locking workers in factories to force them to continue working.

Although, the severest repression appears to have strengthened CSOs' resolve, resulting in: “*more raging to do campaigns and their own initiatives to fight back.*”

c. Proportionate restrictions to curb the spread of the virus

Added to that, entirely reasonable restrictions deployed by authorities (and organisations themselves), notably limits to movement and physical or social distancing measures, have also affected CSOs' ability to operate effectively. It became hard to reach the most vulnerable communities in particular, many of course having no access to any form of digital device or phone. Further, certain community gatherings that are essential for some programme outcomes, such as local peace and reconciliation processes, could not easily be replaced by digital means and so could not take place. This not only affected the emergency COVID response, but also negatively impacted ongoing advocacy and programmes in these communities, much of which had to be put on hold or shelved altogether, with lasting effects:

“NGO staff have restrictions on movement and are not able to bring people physically together. So, you see, community-to-community or local-level interactions will be impacted because those processes cannot happen. And that of course affects, in the larger realm, the prospects for durable peace and stability.”

¹¹ See also: CSPPS, *Fighting Covid-19, Building Peace: A civil society perspective*, supra note 10.

¹² See also: Bond UK/Development Initiatives/Publish What You Fund, *Shrouded in Secrecy: UK Aid cuts are happening behind closed doors, agencies warn*, Press release (26 January 2021) <https://www.bond.org.uk/press-releases/2021/01/shrouded-in-secrecy-uk-aid-cuts-are-happening-behind-closed-doors-agencies>.

BOX 1: INCREASINGLY HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT FOR CSOS

Shrinking civic space

Open civic space is rooted in the fundamental freedoms of people to associate, peacefully assemble and freely express their views and opinions. As such, it is an essential precondition for effective development and achieving the SDGs. The CPDE ICSO 2019 study identified, however, shrinking civic space as a growing global phenomenon. In 2019, CIVICUS noted that the space for civil society was under serious attack in 111 of the world's countries, so considerably more than half. By 2020, this number had risen to 114, and of these, the rating had worsened in 11 countries (and improved in just two).¹³

Emergency response to COVID-19 as a pretext for greater repression

COVID-19 was a major factor spurring this on. Once the WHO declared the outbreak a pandemic, governments worldwide introduced emergency legislation and extraordinary measures in line with international law to help stem the spread of the virus. At the same time, however, repressive governments used this as an opportunity to introduce additional restrictions on civic freedoms.¹⁴ Indeed, Human Rights Watch estimate that at least 83 governments used COVID-19 as a pretext to adopt new, repressive laws and silence critics in 2020.¹⁵ Notably, governments introduced laws granting excessive emergency powers (often without sunset clauses) and mechanisms to enforce lockdowns and curfews, which resulted in rights violations. Freedom of expression and access to information were under threat by governments, including by detaining journalists and censoring 'citizens' as purveyors of 'fake news' for questioning or criticising government actions. Some governments enhanced their surveillance capacities to monitor digital and tele-communications. A number of governments also continued to stigmatise and delegitimise CSOs.¹⁶

Moreover, these tactics disproportionately impacted human rights defenders and excluded groups, including LGBTQ+ people, migrants and refugees, who were already at risk prior to the pandemic.¹⁷

There were also examples where campaigners successfully challenged these. For example, in Kenya and Bolivia there were cases contesting the use of excessive force and the revocation of excessive emergency legislation respectively.¹⁸

5.2 – Digitalisation

a. New ways of working

Movement and physical distancing constraints introduced in response to the pandemic, notably travel bans and requirements to stay at home, meant that organisations had to rapidly upgrade their digital equipment and infrastructure to keep programmes and advocacy running and staff and partners connected. Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp and other digital communication tools have all become familiar features of many workplaces, conferences and events since 2020. All those interviewed found this had had some great benefits for their ability to function effectively, as well as significant drawbacks.

The effect on advocacy and wider participation at meetings had a mixed response. Many hailed the gains in efficiency: "Now, you can be in a conference Africa, and then five minutes later be in one in Latin America." Others celebrated the fact that it enabled more diverse and democratic participation in events:

¹³ CIVICUS, *Civil Society Monitor 2020*, (November 2020), <https://findings2020.monitor.civicus.org/index.html>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* See also: CPDE, *Civil Society Initiatives on Covid-19*, *supra* note 3; Richard Youngs, ed., *Global Civil Society in the Shadow of Coronavirus*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (27 September 2020) https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Youngs-Coronavirus_Civil_Society_final.pdf; Human Rights Watch, *COVID-19 Triggers Wave of Free Speech Abuse*, Special feature (11 February 2021), <https://features.hrw.org/features/features/covid/index.html>; IBON International, *Spreading State Terror under the Pandemic and Terror Law*, (1 March 2021) <https://iboninternational.org/download/spreading-state-terror-under-the-pandemic-and-terror-law/>.

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, *COVID-19 Triggers Wave of Free Speech Abuse*, *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See: CIVICUS, *Slovenia: The government has taken advantage of the pandemic to restrict protest*, Interview (26 February 2021). <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/4931-slovenia-the-government-has-taken-advantage-of-the-pandemic-to-restrict-protest>.

¹⁷ CIVICUS, *Civil Society Monitor 2020*, *supra* note 13.

¹⁸ CIVICUS, *Civil Freedoms and the COVID-19 Pandemic: A snapshot of restrictions and attacks*, (5 October 2020) <https://monitor.civicus.org/COVID19/>.

"[O]rganisations that would never dream of going in person, but they are present in a way in the discussions in the UN Human Rights Council. They can take the mike and speak. They couldn't do that before, and now they can."

Those more used to attending these meetings in person, however, were frustrated by the lack of face-to-face contact and opportunities for side conversations, off-the-record chats and networking.¹⁹ Nevertheless, many expressed the hope that at least some virtual elements would be retained to allow for broader participation in discussions once in-person events resume.

While lockdowns halted a lot of activity, it did prompt some creative solutions to programming, including developing apps for village loans and savings associations, putting training modules onto online platforms, and bringing together focus group participants from many different countries with impressive results, which organisations said would not have occurred to them to do before. However, participants pointed out that there could be no substitute for certain face-to-face meetings, for example, when discussing complicated financial matters or sensitive issues, such as violence or abuse:

"[B]ecause they are in-person, they're not worrying that you're recording it, that there's someone else there, that you're going to forward it to someone else or whatever. It's there, you're in-person and they can trust you."

b. The digital divide

"It's an interconnected world, but some are more interconnected than others. We're not all equal."

By far and away the biggest downside, mentioned by almost every participant, was, despite its ability to bring diverse and geographically dispersed people together, digitalisation has further widened existing divides. For example, one interviewee described how colleagues in Zimbabwe, where digital infrastructure is weak, struggle to stay on calls or that representatives from Southern governments and CSOs at one international event had to submit pre-recorded speeches in advance as they could not be sure of having the connectivity to speak at any given moment in proceedings. Some mentioned that they had relied on communicating with rights holders over the internet or phone during the pandemic: they could not reach communities in the most remote areas, however, where there was no access to anything like that, as well as groups within societies, who were more likely to be excluded:

"You would be able to be in touch with people in high-skilled jobs, for example, and who have more resources than people in lower-skilled jobs. I am sure that women have been more marginalised in [accessing the] internet, even within the household if there is only one computer or one digital device or problems with the internet connection. So, women, youth and also minority groups are affected by this."

¹⁹ See also, Amy Lieberman, "UN Forum Offers 'Sobering' Vision of SDGs Progress and New Virtual Reality," *Devex*, (21 July 2020), <https://www.devex.com/news/un-forum-offers-sobering-vision-of-sdgs-progress-and-new-virtual-reality-97713>

BOX 2: DIGITALISATION

The CPDE ICSO 2019 study signalled the advance of the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution,' the rapidly evolving and uneven process of digitalisation that was already well underway, fuelled by increasing digital connectivity and a growing number of digital devices and services. This was a trend that offered both great opportunities and threats to CSOs' ability to operate effectively.

Digital responses to COVID-19

COVID-19 has hastened the march of digitalisation with almost bewildering speed. Unable to travel, reach rights holders directly or convene in-person meetings or gatherings, Zoom, Microsoft Teams and other online platforms quickly became an everyday means of doing business. In an era of restricted movement and physical distancing, it revolutionised ways of working and gave rise to creative new solutions to problems. For example, by expanding hotlines and providing remote legal support and advice services for women experiencing GBV; developing interactive online training sessions for rights awareness; creating resources that could be accessed via Facebook to support families with online schooling.²⁰ At the international level, webcasts live-streamed international conferences, and 'virtual conversations' were held with key players enabling direct engagement that would never have been possible otherwise for many participants; technology also helped harness the power of big data, such as the International Aid Transparency Initiative's (IATI) COVID-dashboard providing rolling information to enable tracking of COVID-related activities and spending by donors and NGOs.²¹

The widening digital divide

Technological advances and applications have changed how we work and interact, but this has not happened equitably. Wealthy countries are better connected than poorer ones, and the dividends of digital economies reside primarily with countries and tech companies in the Global North. Within countries, communities and households, the marginalised have become further excluded through poor connectivity and lack of access to equipment. As the digital divide grows, campaigners have renewed calls for internet access to be considered a basic human right as access to other fundamental rights, such as education, food and shelter or freedoms of speech and association, increasingly depend upon it.²²

The dark side of digitalisation

There are dark sides to digitalisation too. The speed of change we are now witnessing, moreover, means that these risk far outpacing attempts to combat them. Notably, the pandemic has seen a worrying rise in online sexual exploitation, particularly child abuse, enabled by the increase in online time and physical confinement during the pandemic.²³ Repressive governments have increased levels of surveillance and control of activists and critics by monitoring digital and tele-communications and, in some cases, restricting or shutting off the internet altogether. Private data can be accessed and shared, often without meaningful consent given; and the relatively unregulated 'corporate capture' of technology has sparked surveillance and privacy concerns relating to giant digital companies, and even accusations of collusion with State repression.²⁴ The negative environmental impacts are considerable too, from the extraction of raw materials needed for hardware, their built-in obsolescence contributing to waste, to the expansion of internet services consuming increasing proportions of global electricity supplies.²⁵

²⁰ CIVICUS, *Solidarity in the Time of Covid-19*, supra note 10.

²¹ See <https://covid19.humportal.org>

²² Web Foundation, *It's Time to Recognise Internet Access as a Human Right*, Blog (28 October 2020) <https://webfoundation.org/2020/10/its-time-to-recognise-internet-access-as-a-human-right/>

²³ See Interpol, *Threats and Trends Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: COVID-19 impact*, (September 2020).

²⁴ See for example: IBON International, *Is the 'New Normal' Really New: Systemic change or a re-established 'old system'?*, Policy brief, (October 2020). <https://iboninternational.org/download/is-the-new-normal-really-new-systemic-change-or-a-re-established-old-system/>

²⁵ Mike Cummings, "The Surge in Digital Activity Has Hidden Environmental Costs" *Yale News*, (27 January 2021) <https://news.yale.edu/2021/01/27/surge-digital-activity-has-hidden-environmental-costs>

5.3 – Funding

Participants based in London or Brussels felt relatively well insulated in financial terms themselves, although reports indicate smaller NGOs based in the Global North have suffered more than larger INGOs.²⁶ The availability of funding for national CSOs in the Global South to survive the crisis in particular, as well as for programmatic work on the ground in the medium to longer-term, troubled all interviewees in one way or another:

“When organisations were expected to do a lot more than they usually do, they have a lot less support than they usually have.”

a. Funding for INGOs and CSO platforms and membership networks

One interviewee from an INGO found that there had not been enough institutional funding to meet the scale of need, meaning there were people that they had been unable to help as a result. Others, however, thought that donors had provided sufficient resources for the emergency. All of the interviewees that commented on this also found that major donors, and foundations in particular, had been flexible in their administrative and financial processes, allowing organisations to adjust and retro-fit existing grants to meet the needs of the crisis. Although their processes for achieving this could be slow and over-bureaucratic. For example, one participant mentioned hold ups caused by the need to explain to auditors why visits to certain parts of a country or monitoring visits in general were not possible. This impacts the timeliness and so the effectiveness of CSOs' responses as a result. Concern was expressed too that funding was being directed towards the crisis at the expense of other important work that was also relevant, such as gender-related programming in one case: *“Projects in the pipeline that got put on hold. The calls got cancelled.”* This perception is reflected in ODA data (see Box 3).

This has left INGOs coping in the short-term, but worried about the medium and longer-term impacts on funding and their ability to operate. They expressed concern that 'pandemic fatigue' will set in among donors, both in terms of the flexibility they have afforded NGOs to date and the amounts that will be available down the line. Indeed, one had even been told that this would be the case:

“[Donors] have been channelling a lot of money into the COVID response, but [they] have also said it will impact the cooperation budgets for the years to come.”

Interviewees have been planning for ODA spending channelled through NGOs to stagnate or, at worst, decrease sharply in future in line with current trends (see Box 3). This is compounded by the fact that supporter donations also dropped off during the pandemic as regular fundraising activities and collections could not go ahead due to COVID restrictions, and many supporters themselves have suffered financially in the pandemic.

b. National CSOs' access to funding

The greatest concerns expressed, however, were for the ability of national and local-level CSOs to sustain themselves through the crisis, and even to survive. Many had already struggled to access funding before the pandemic as the relatively limited amounts they received tended to be restricted to individual projects, and so impeded their ability to invest in the longer-term sustainability of the organisation.²⁷ The pandemic seems to have made the situation worse, and at a time when national CSOs were needed more than ever:

“[National CSOs] responded [...] to needs, urgent needs, like health, education, protective equipment or sanitary items, the very basics. Even the organisations not doing that kind of work, restructured their operations in order to do things that they were not used to doing: at least providing food, because the people they were working with were hungry! They started feeding people.”

According to a survey of its members conducted by CIVICUS, 89 per cent were negatively impacted financially during the early months of the pandemic, of which nearly half did not think their organisations could survive for long.

²⁶ Bond UK, *Programmes at Risk as More NGOs Face Closure*, Press release. (6 May 2020) <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2020/05/programmes-at-risk-as-more-ngos-face-closure>

²⁷ CIVICUS, *Covid-19: Members views on civil society resilience and sustainability*, (September 2020), https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/resourcing-covid-19-survey_english.pdf.

Reasons given for this included the abrupt halt or postponement in donor funding, INGO partners shutting down operations and the effect of lockdowns on community-level fundraising activities and donations.²⁸ Two interview participants further reported that, unable to raise funds nationally in these difficult times, their national CSO member organisations had then been unable to meet the requirements to access match-funding from one major donor as a result. In other cases, national CSOs were simply not included in calls for COVID response funding at all. This unequal picture has been reported elsewhere too.²⁹

BOX 3: BLENDED AND PRIVATE SECTOR FINANCE AND OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE (ODA)

Blended finance and the 'Beyond Aid' agenda

The rise of Development Finance Institutions (DFIs)³⁰ as part of the development architecture has been a trend for many years, boosted by the 'Beyond Aid' agenda. The aim was to leverage private finance to help finance the SDGs by moving from 'billions' of US dollars in development aid to 'trillions' in investment to fill projected funding gaps.³¹ The validity of this approach has been questioned by some, however, who claim that sums have amounted to no more than 'billions' to 'billions' of US dollars in practice. It is argued, for example, that as DFIs target middle-income countries (MICs), where returns on investment are more secure, a small fraction is spent on improving conditions in the poorest countries, where aid and development is most needed.³² Critics also point to the lack of transparency on the impacts of DFIs' investments.³³

DFIs' response to COVID-19

DFIs positioned themselves as the 'vital frontline' in preserving jobs and supporting economies in the pandemic,³⁴ and increasing proportions of public aid money were channelled through DFIs.³⁵ The International Finance Corporation (IFC), the blended finance arm of the World Bank, for example, announced \$8 billion USDs in fast-track financial support to this end with most committed to existing clients.³⁶ During the first six months of the pandemic, however, the vast majority of additional DFI investment continued to be directed towards the 'low hanging fruit' of MICs. It also did not target the sectors and clients most needed for sustainable recovery within those countries.³⁷

Official Development Assistance (ODA)

ODA is government aid that is targeted at reducing poverty and supporting the economic development and welfare of developing countries. At a time of greatest need for sustainable development in the poorest corners of the world, however, it appears that levels of ODA continue to fall.

ODA has been decreasing since 2016, with slight growth in 2019. However, analysis by Development Initiatives of rolling IATI aid data indicates that bi-lateral donors' ODA commitments between January–November 2020 fell overall by 26 per cent compared with the same period in 2019. Further, as noted above, increased levels of ODA are going to DFIs and private instruments, leaving proportionally less for bi-lateral assistance to developing partner countries and NGO funding.³⁸ Largely accounted for by the US, bi-lateral donors increased their spending on health during

²⁸ CIVICUS, *Covid-19: Members views on civil society resilience and sustainability*, *Ibid*.

²⁹ Guelph Institute of Development Studies, College of Social and Applied Human Sciences, *The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Canada's Foreign Aid Sector*, (October 2020), https://gids.uoguelph.ca/system/files/Covid19%20Report_Final_2.pdf.

³⁰ There is no established definition for DFIs, but the OECD defines them as: specialised development banks or subsidiaries set up to support private sector development in developing countries. They are usually majority-owned by national governments and source their capital from national or international development funds or benefit from government guarantees.

³¹ World Bank, *From Billions to Trillions: Transforming development finance*, (2015), Document prepared jointly by the AfDB, ADB, EBRD, EIB, IADB, IMF and World Bank Group for the 18 April Development Committee meeting. Washington, DC: World Bank, [siteresources.worldbank.org/DEVCOMMINT/Documentation/23659446/DC2015-0002\(E\)FinancingforDevelopment.pdf](https://www.worldbank.org/DEVCOMMINT/Documentation/23659446/DC2015-0002(E)FinancingforDevelopment.pdf).

³² UN Capital Development Fund and OECD, *Blended Finance in the Least Developed Countries*, (2020), <https://www.uncdf.org/bf/dcs/home>; Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development, *2021 Financing for Sustainable Development Report*, (forthcoming publication). https://developmentfinance.un.org/sites/developmentfinance.un.org/files/AUV_2021%20FSDR.pdf.

³³ See for example: ODI, *Blended Finance in the Poorest Countries: A need for a better approach*, (April 2019), <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12666.pdf>

³⁴ European Development Finance Institutions, *A call to action to European governments and their Development Finance Institutions*, (30 April 2020), <https://www.edfi.eu/news/callforaction>.

³⁵ Using ODA and OOF flows published to the IATI Standard, Development Initiatives reported a 35% increase in total aid disbursements from DFIs over this period, with ODA representing over half (52%) of this, a significant increase (28%) from the same period in 2019. See: Amy Dodd, Dean Breed and Daniel Coppard, *How is Aid Changing in the Covid-19 Pandemic?* Development Initiatives, (November 2020), <https://devinit.org/resources/how-aid-changing-covid-19-pandemic/#b8ff6d34>.

³⁶ IFC website: https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/news_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/news+and+events/covid-19.

³⁷ Eurodad, *Development Finance Institutions and Covid-19: Time to reset*, (November 2020); Amy Dodd, Hilary Jeune and Sam Ashby, *"Blended Finance: The best use of a limited resource?"* Development Initiatives, (11 March 2021), <https://devinit.org/blog/blended-finance-oda-best-use-limited-resource>.

³⁸ Development Initiatives, *How is Aid Changing in the Covid-19 Pandemic?* *Supra* note 35.

the COVID-19 pandemic,³⁹ although this should be considered in the light of steady declines in ODA spending on health since 2015 and severe weaknesses in public health and social protection systems exposed by the pandemic globally.⁴⁰ Moreover, it appears that COVID-related health spending has been at the expense of other areas, especially economic sectors and peace and security, despite mounting need and the fact that investment in these areas will be vital for recovery.⁴¹

Climate-related funding slightly decreased during this period too, suggesting that official pronouncements in support of a green recovery from the pandemic have not yet filtered through into ODA funding.⁴² Looking to the future, however, the experience of COVID-19 is likely to place yet further pressure on bi-lateral donors to spend more on addressing global challenges, like climate change, which benefits everyone. By further blurring boundaries between development assistance and global public goods, this looks set to leave less of the dwindling ODA pot to go directly towards reducing poverty and supporting economic development in the poorest countries.⁴³

5.4 – Impacts on staff

Most interview and survey participants noted the effects of the pandemic and responses to it on themselves and colleagues. A year into the crisis, many admitted to feelings of isolation, stress and burnout due, for example, to the increased and more challenging workload, seemingly relentless Zoom calls, and, in many cases, juggling greater caring responsibilities at home or others taking on colleagues' workloads to enable them better to cope with those. Of course, there were also cases of staff themselves and colleagues falling sick from the virus or suffering the loss of loved ones to it. CSOs have also had little, if any, resources to provide psycho-social support to staff.

Many pointed out that INGOs were relatively well insulated compared with national CSOs: despite experiencing some programme closures, ICSOs had funding at this time. There was nevertheless anxiety among ICSO staff about deep cuts to programmes and jobs to come with reductions to ODA and other forms of funding looming on the horizon.

There were also positive experiences. Many expressed feelings of tremendous pride at being in a position to be able to respond to the crisis and the belief that their work was more important than ever:

"We were there, we put aside the other things we needed to work on and we just focused on what needed to happen."

Many had also begun to re-evaluate the need for travelling to the same extent as they had before or going to the office every day, and thought that working life would not return to 'business as usual' once the pandemic had subsided.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development, *2021 Financing for Sustainable Development Report*, *supra* note, 32.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* This was echoed by Concord, which noted that resources in the EU's initial coordinated response to the pandemic in partner countries were mostly redirected from other budgets, see: Concord, *Aidwatch 2020: Knock-on Effects, An urgent call to leave no one behind*, (28 October 2020) <https://concordeurope.org/2020/10/28/aidwatch-2020-knock-on-effects-an-urgent-call-to-leave-no-one-behind/>.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Mikaela Gavas and Samuel Pleeck, *Global Trends in 2021: How COVID-19 Is transforming international development*, CGD, (2 March 2021). <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/global-trends-2021-how-covid-transforming-international-development>

6 - THE ISTANBUL PRINCIPLES: THE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC AND RESPONSES TO IT

In 2010, following thousands of consultations, 170 CSOs agreed a set of eight principles as a framework to guide the effectiveness of their operations as independent development actors in their own right. These became known as the 'Istanbul Principles' and formed part of the GPEDC's shared set of principles, goals and commitments for effective development, which were agreed at the Fourth High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan in 2011 (the Busan Partnership Agreement for Effective Development Cooperation (2011)).⁴⁴

The CPDE ICSO constituency group undertook studies in 2016 and 2019 to gain insights into how CSOs, and INGOs in particular, were implementing the Istanbul Principles and their continued relevance. These studies identified four effectiveness principles that INGOs found more challenging to implement fully, which were: focus on people's empowerment, democratic ownership and participation (IP3); promote environmental sustainability (IP4); practice transparency and accountability (IP5); and pursue equitable partnerships and solidarity (IP6).⁴⁵

Due to the unprecedented scale and complexity of the COVID-19 crisis, this study returned to explore its effects on the full set of effectiveness principles. It found that the pandemic has created many challenges, some new opportunities and fresh perspectives for ICSOs in implementing all of them. In particular, the primary and secondary effects of the pandemic and various responses to them, posed particularly severe challenges for CSOs to put respecting and promoting human rights and social justice (IP1) and promoting women and girls' rights (IP2) into practice. The implementation of areas that tested INGOs most in the past, notably enabling people's empowerment, democratic ownership and participation (IP3) and pursuing equitable partnerships and solidarity (IP6) were placed under further pressure too. Although, as INGOs were forced to rely on their national CSO partners more and communities themselves had to step up to protect and support each other during the pandemic, progress in these areas was noted too. The pandemic also speeded up progress in accepting many working practices that are likely to remain in place beyond the pandemic, such as reduced travel and increased flexibility to work from home.

6.1 – Respect and promote human rights and social justice

Interviewees shared a number of challenges to their ability to promote human rights and social justice as a result of the pandemic. The chief problem they faced was that the most vulnerable and marginalised in society were typically the hardest hit, and also the hardest to reach. Lawyers and CSO staff, for example, were not considered to be 'essential services' by many governments and so were unable to by-pass movement and physical distancing restrictions to gain access to clients and vulnerable groups during lockdowns, leaving many without the support they needed: *"The pandemic affected all that, and even eroded some of the gains that had been made."*

The digital divide (see box 2) meant the most vulnerable and marginalised also did not benefit from digital solutions that were available. Further, the inevitable digitalisation of much of the response posed fresh concerns for safety and security in using online platforms and digital communications, particularly for human rights defenders in an increasingly hostile environment. For example, one participant noted they had had to switch digital providers for sensitive communications due to the security risk. It was also not clear how many groups were fully aware of these risks and how best to mitigate them. In the worst cases, organisations had to be more cautious about public calls and statements too: *"We have always to be careful."*

Conflict and fragile settings posed particular complexities for organisations operating in them:

⁴⁴ Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation. Fourth High-level Forum of Aid Effectiveness. Busan, South Korea. (29 November-1 December 2011), https://www.effectivecooperation.org/system/files/2020-06/OUTCOME_DOCUMENT_-_FINAL_EN2.pdf

⁴⁵ CPDE, *How effective are International Non-Governmental Organisations?* *Supra* note 4; CPDE, *Accelerating the Implementation of the Istanbul Principles by INGOs in a Changing Development Landscape*, *supra* note 5.

“If you are in Syria, what does it mean to target the most vulnerable? Are they most vulnerable because of the pandemic or because of ongoing crisis and conflict? [...] The pandemic is way down the list. These are the issues that people are facing here right now.”

Internally, the picture was more positive. Not as a result of the pandemic, but some participants shared that their organisations had been piloting improved diversity and inclusion policies, for example, with greater sensitivity towards hiring and promotion practices, and to be more representative externally by refusing to participate in all-male or all-white speaking panels. Although, it should also be pointed out that many participants commented that true diversity and representation remains a serious sector-wide challenge.

6.2 – Embody gender equality and equity while promoting women and girls' rights

Many of the challenges noted above also applied to CSOs' ability to promote women and girls' rights during the pandemic. As with human rights and social justice, organisations remain as committed to this as they ever were, and highlighted women and girls' rights and particular needs in their advocacy and communications related to the pandemic. However, it became much harder to implement in practice.

Participants believe that gender rights have taken a giant “step back,” echoing numerous reports detailing the extent to which women and girls have been disproportionately impacted, including accompanying sharp rises in domestic violence and early marriages, as well as the additional caring responsibilities that have primarily fallen on women for sick relatives and schooling children.⁴⁶ By the same token, cuts to aid programmes generally are likely to impact women and girls disproportionately too.⁴⁷ This has been compounded by the suspension and the cancellation of gender-specific programmes in the pandemic by organisations due to factors, such as public health concerns and movement restrictions, as well as funding cutbacks.⁴⁸ For example, one participant noted that gender-related programming proposals had been suspended by donors in the wake of COVID-19, such as a large, multi-country gender-related digital inclusion programme, including improvements to infrastructure, which had been planned for multiple countries in East and West Africa.

Another participant commented on the marked absence of women participating in decision-making around the response. Although, and as partial testament at least perhaps to the success of previous gender empowerment work they had supported, they shared how women at local levels in West Africa, themselves “*went and found their place*.” For example, in Mali:

“[W]e saw some of them being invited to decide which are the families that can benefit from the different cash transfers together with the governments. And, of course, it's at small scale level – how do we do that at the bigger level? It's not happening at the capital level, but in certain municipalities, it's happening.”

Internally, interviewees felt that their organisations had responded positively to the particular needs of female staff at this time. Organisations introduced policies allowing for flexible working and time off for all staff, for example, to enable them to carry out additional caring responsibilities. These were taken up by women in particular, who typically experience a disproportionate burden there too. However, promoting the rights of women remains a sector-wide challenge too. One participant commented that senior leaders in the sector are still predominantly male.

⁴⁶ See also: UN Women, *Impact of Covid-19 on Violence against Women and Girls and Service Provision*, supra note 9; CARE, *COVID-19 Could Condemn Women to Decades of Poverty*, supra note 9; Concord, *EU global response to COVID-19*, supra note 9.

⁴⁷ Maya Oppenheim, “Women and Girls Disproportionately Affected by UK Government's ‘Devastating’ Cuts to Overseas Aid,” *The Independent*, (10 March 2021), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/uk-aid-cuts-women-disproportionately-affected-b1814760.html>

⁴⁸ The level of cuts to gender-related programmes appears to vary from donor to donor, see Guelph Institute of Development Studies, College of Social and Applied Human Sciences, *The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Canada's Foreign Aid Sector*, Supra note 29.

6.3 – Focus on people's empowerment, democratic ownership and participation

As noted above, clampdowns on civic space by repressive regimes have impeded CSOs ability to put people's empowerment, democratic ownership and participation into practice in many settings during the pandemic. And while some governments have welcomed CSO participation and input into their response, many have not. We have also noted above that some even previously open governments shut down calls by CSOs for information, consultation and engagement. This in turn has negative consequences for the rights holders they represent. Movement and physical distancing restrictions have prevented CSOs from reaching many vulnerable communities and holding in-person meetings or convening gatherings.

A high proportion of INGOs surveyed in the CPDE ICSO 2016 study believed they were able to involve local rights holders and communities in the design and planning of programmes, advocacy and communications, but less so (56 per cent) in INGOs' priorities. Nevertheless, short donor timelines and lack of dedicated funding for community participation in project design continued to act as barriers to consulting rights holders according to one interviewee:

"You don't have the time or the resources to go in and do participant design with groups [...] it's built in to the process, or [some aspects of the programme are] a requirement. There are things that can be done, but all of these processes – they're such short timelines and we do the best we can do under pressed time, which isn't the best."

However, more positively, another interviewee noted an example of how their work in relation to people's empowerment and participation with village savings groups and local authorities had borne fruit. When they could not reach communities at the start of the pandemic, the communities took charge themselves:

"Some of them were giving me calls, [saying] 'our community has started washing our hands, making sure the kids go to school together' [...] They were really influencing, they were really changing the ways their families were living and showing that those families [...] have food because of the savings groups, they have a solidarity box and they went into it and made masks for older people."

The digital divide notwithstanding, creative digital solutions have helped to reach and facilitate engagement with local populations in some cases. Although one interviewee sounded an important note of caution:

"All of a sudden if you want access to something you have to do it digitally, and you do it, but maybe we haven't built enough community capacity around what it means when you give your personal information around those kinds of things. To me, that's where some of that rights-based discussion needs to happen. We have a whole couple of generations around rights that mean certain things. That looks different when you take it to the digital sphere and our conversations [about that] are not anywhere up to speed with our implementation."

Given the constraints, participants were broadly happy with digital solutions that organisations introduced to enable staff consultation and participation internally during the pandemic. A few interviewees believed staff meetings were better attended than they had been before the pandemic, and seen as more important by staff. Another commented on how the use of chat and comment functions in Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Docs had evolved over the year, providing an avenue for more people to contribute than would have been the case previously, but also a means for people who are intimidated by speaking up in-person to do so in writing, and anonymously: *"that removed a lot of inhibitions from a lot of people."*

6.4 – Promote environmental sustainability

Prior to the pandemic, a number of organisations had been gearing up to highlight climate change in their advocacy and communications in 2020, but this receded when COVID-19 took hold. Since then, however, organisations have increasingly been making the link between the COVID-19 crisis to draw attention to the need to tackle the impending climate crisis, and for the economic recovery to be a green recovery. There have also been calls to work across the divides, for example with campaigns, such as "Crack the Crises," a coalition calling on decision-makers to act against the triple crises of COVID, injustice and climate change (see box 5).

Internally, the halt in global travel over a prolonged period, combined with the effectiveness of many digital tools has led to a profound shift in organisations. Most reflected that although there was no substitute for face-to-face meetings in some situations, much of their travel pre-pandemic had been unnecessary. When international travel returns, they thought that trips would have to be justified much better. As one participant put it:

“Before the pandemic we [...] could have probably cut our travel by 25%, and may by one third if we really pushed it, as so much requires face-to-face etc. But we are now looking for a 50-60% reduction. And I don’t think we will have any problem at all in achieving that.”

In addition, many interviewees noted that working from home arrangements were likely to be retained, resulting in fewer journeys to and from the office, and organisations would likely hire smaller offices. There had also been a substantial reduction in office supplies because so much more work is taking place online. Although of course working online has negative environmental impacts too.

6.5 – Practice transparency and accountability

a. Transparency

IATI is clearly better suited to reporting timely updates on COVID-related aid spending and activities than the OECD-DAC. As noted above, IATI developed a COVID-19-dedicated dashboard allowing organisations to publish and view this information specifically in relation to the pandemic on a rolling basis.⁴⁹ A number of NGOs are publishing information on their activities to this, but it is still a challenge to encourage NGOs to do this.

One interviewee suspected that the frantic nature of the response over the last year meant that tasks involving publishing information had been “pushed down the list.” On the other hand, so much more information had been made available digitally over the last year, another thought that could have a negative effect on transparency:

“I think we have too much information because everything is available. It’s a way of killing transparency, actually. You just make tonnes of documents and tonnes of issues available and then just throw out a thousand webinars, and then you don’t know where to pick the right one.”

Internally, transparency is all the more critical in times of crisis. It is important for the senior leadership in organisations to be open with staff about the true nature and extent of the challenges they face. At least one organisation featured in this study had been due to start a restructuring process just before COVID-19 hit, which was postponed. But consultations were nevertheless ongoing during the pandemic. Digital tools enabled staff to be involved in discussions and the participant interviewed here felt that this had gone as well as it could.

b. Accountability

Organisations have continued to practice accountability to donors during the pandemic. Indeed, the emergency nature of much of the response has made reporting more straightforward in some senses:

“It’s easier to be transparent and accountable about how many hand-washing stations you’ve set up than it is what policy change you have brought about.”

In the CPDE ICSO 2016 study, INGO survey participants noted that while accountability to donors and supporters was strong, many struggled with “downward accountability” to rights holders in the communities they were there to help. Just over half of that study’s respondents thought their organisation had policies that enabled partners or affected populations to hold them accountable. This study was not able to establish whether that had improved or worsened during the pandemic, but some examples of accountability initiatives and mechanisms that organisations kept going during this period were provided in interviews. Notably: ‘Resilient Roots,’ a grassroots accountability project led by CIVICUS that, following a 2.5-year pilot phase, aims to enable its alliance members to put accountability to the communities they serve and their staff at their core.⁵⁰

Another that was mentioned is: the ‘Trade Union Development Effectiveness Profile Tool.’ This well-established mutual accountability and learning tool enables solidarity support organisations in the Global North and their partners from the Global South to discuss and reach joint agreement, on a case-by-case basis, the extent to which each organisation is living up to the development effectiveness principles with each other in their partnership. If that is not the case for any of the principles, it prompts them to identify and agree steps together to put that right.⁵¹

⁴⁹ <https://covid19.humportal.org/activities>

⁵⁰ <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/what-we-do/innovate/resilient-roots>

⁵¹ <https://www.ituc-csi.org/tu-development-effectiveness-10464>

6.6 – Pursue equitable partnerships and solidarity

“[S]ometimes your partner next to you feels like your implementing partner, you want them to be at the same level, but the pandemic has not allowed us to get to that level when we feel we are all equal.”

This is the area identified as the one that INGOs were struggling with most in the CPDE ICSO 2016 and 2019 studies. The pandemic does appear to have had both negative and positive effects on this, although the underlying barriers to achieving equitable partnerships with Southern national and local CSOs appear still to be a problem.

a. Donor-led constraints to equitable partnerships

INGOs have continued to act as conduits for major donor funding in the pandemic. Indeed, interviewees reported that major donors still channelled the majority of their COVID-19 response funding through larger INGOs with smaller, national CSOs not always even included in the funding calls. Already more a feature in the humanitarian space, large-scale contracts as opposed to grants continue to grow in popularity with major donors in the development sphere too, which further limits the flexibility and scope for partner CSOs to have meaningful inputs into priorities, planning and delivery. In the case of one major donor mentioned by interviewees, the level of specificity they required meant that NGOs were unable to choose the region where or the organisations with whom they should work, or even what results were expected. Likewise, the levels of compliance to meet donor requirements remain, and seem to be increasing each year:

“It’s in real tension with the principles of equity with partners, and empowerment and participation. [...] It is a real struggle for us, and because of [our bottom-up] approach, we don’t have a highly formalised, rigorous approach to partner compliance. So, we are having to try and bolt that on top of our traditional ways of working with partners. But it’s almost like they’re incompatible. It’s almost like they are two different philosophies. It’s a real headache the amount and effort it consumes, it’s like it doubles every year.”

b. CSOs did not experience the pandemic in the same way

There was a major divide in how INGOs and northern-based NGOs on the one hand, and Southern national and local CSOs on the other, have experienced the pandemic, which has exacerbated already pre-existing inequalities: *“We did not experience this in the same way.”* For example, one interviewee noted that when a government raided offices and froze bank accounts, the INGO could rely on their global federation to support them financially and with legal redress, as well as provide them with a sense of external solidarity, but local organisations do not have the same recourse to this.

These issues cover not just organisations’ respective capacities to respond to threats and intimidation by authorities, but range from being in a position to take full advantage of digital opportunities to challenges in accessing funding, and even the ability for local organisations to survive financially during the pandemic. These were explored in more detail above in the sections relating to digitalisation (see pages 8-9 above) and CSO funding (see pages 11-12 above).

“Now with COVID-19, partner organisations have been more adversely affected. They cannot go to work, implement projects, maintain staff. These inequalities remain and have been exacerbated.”

c. The constraints of the pandemic bring some progress

Movement restrictions brought about by the pandemic meant INGOs had to rely on their partners and volunteers in-country more or find new, less traditional, groups with whom to collaborate to get the work done. This demonstrated alternative, more equal, ways of working and strengthened existing partnerships in many cases. Although, there were some examples of push backs from local partners, for instance on being asked to do too much by the INGO with insufficient resources.⁵² It has also prompted deeper reflection on the nature of partnerships among staff in all of the INGOs featured in this study, and should help to hasten progress in this area as a result.

⁵² See also Emma Smith and Vince Chadwick, “Local Professionals Step in to Fill Delivery Gap amid Questions over Resources” *Devex*, (2 June 2020), <https://www.devex.com/news/local-professionals-step-in-to-fill-delivery-gap-amid-questions-over-resources-97363>.

Concurrent digital advances have had positive effects on the nature of partnerships too. While digital formats do not work well for more sensitive topics as noted above, one interviewee reported how they had 'opened up' their partner organisations for them in many ways, allowing them to engage and form relationships with a wider range of staff, covering different areas of their work and levels of seniority. It was also thought to be important to support partner organisations with capacity-building in this area, beyond operating calls on Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Some noted, however, that the pace of change has been so fast that much more needs to be done with CSO partners to improve awareness and capacity around security of online communications and data rights.

The exceptional circumstances also enabled some INGOs to forge relationships with new types of groups, particularly for advocacy and research. In one case, an organisation worked with a much less formalised youth group to conduct research into the challenges of the pandemic among women in communities: "*we would never have cooperated with [this group] before, just because our processes are so heavy.*" The interviewee commented, however, that this required their own leadership to allow the relaxation of certain requirements, for example, the need for bank accounts or whose signature they could accept. They also accepted that the same would not be possible for most programmes work, where due diligence levels must be higher.

There are also good examples of partners' integration beyond implementing programmes, advocacy and research. Albeit not formed in response to the pandemic, Act Church of Sweden, part of the Act Alliance, for example, established an International Reference Group to provide advice on and input into the organisation's strategies and priorities. Although members of the group do not 'formally' represent Act Church of Sweden's partners, they are nominated by them. They met for the first time in-person just prior to the pandemic in January 2020 and will now meet digitally.

"It provides the justification, the reasoning and the proof that the discussions that were happening on the need for a better balance of power relationships, [...] of supporting Southern leaders and accompanying Southern partners, instead of instructing Southern partners [...]. It has catalysed action that was slated to happen anyway, but it has propelled earlier action."

BOX 4: LOCALISATION AND SHIFTING THE BALANCE OF POWER

The localisation agenda

The CPDE ICSO 2019 study noted growing support for decentralising, or localising, power and ownership of development initiatives, inspired by the conviction that local resources, as well as leadership and buy-in from local actors, are necessary pre-conditions for effective development cooperation. Notably, one of the commitments made by donors and aid organisations at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) was for at least 25 per cent of global humanitarian funding (from only 2 per cent in 2016) to go “as directly as possible” to local and national responders by 2020. The latest Grand Bargain independent progress report highlighted that “substantial progress” had been made in this area. Most acknowledged, however, that it had not led to a system-wide shift in practice as yet.⁵³ Interviewees in this study shared this perception, stating ‘localisation’ was more rhetoric than practice still.

Shifting the balance of power debates return to centre stage

Debates on ‘shifting the power’ between INGOs and national and local CSOs in the Global South have also centred on INGOs’ traditional role as ‘gate-keepers’ for international aid according to the 2019 study. Many organisations have tried to decentralise, led by ActionAid moving its headquarters from the UK to South Africa. Others advance the need for a bigger shift in favour of smaller organisations sharing power and resources more equitably. These debates have come to the fore again in recent years. Firstly, following a number of safeguarding scandals involving leading INGOs that hit the headlines in 2018,⁵⁴ donors suspended funding until targets for improvement were met.⁵⁵ These debates resurfaced in 2020, following protests worldwide, sparked initially by racist killings by police in the USA, calling out systemic power imbalances upheld by systems and structures in wider society. As with companies, academic institutions and others, it forced INGOs and donors to look afresh at the need to put anti-racism and the ‘decolonisation’ of their own practices at the heart of the international aid sector.⁵⁶

The current lack of progress in shifting power to date in practice can at least partially be explained by concurrent trends identified in the CPDE ICSO 2019 study. For example, it noted a greater emphasis from bi-lateral donors on linking aid spending to their strategic national interests, be that for trade, migration or security interests, and increasingly stringent donor requirements that “stifle CSO development effectiveness,” as well as dwindling aid budgets leading to fewer, larger, results-based contracts and financing arrangements. These further entrench the relative power of INGOs as those better equipped to meet increasingly stringent donor demands. Indeed, the Grand Bargain’s 2020 progress report echoed this, citing local responders being held to international standards and processes, and international actors competing with local responders for international funding as key barriers to localisation.⁵⁷

Putting some structure to the rhetoric

There are current examples of major donors and INGOs, however, taking active steps to structure funding and programmes more equitably to move beyond the rhetoric. ‘Just Future’ is a five-year project to be delivered by six CSOs and networks from the Global North (Cordaid and Search for Common Ground) and South (the African Security Sector Network, the Liaison Office, the West African Network for Peacebuilding and the Women’s International Peace Centre). It is funded by the Foreign Ministry of the Netherlands under their ‘Power of Voices’ funding stream. The project aims to enable people in fragile States to benefit from more accessible, responsive and accountable security and justice institutions, as well as more inclusive arrangements for political governance and peace-making. It explicitly aims to apply a bottom up, inclusive and participatory approach and incorporate principles of mutual accountability, participation, inclusivity and shared responsibility in the project’s partnerships.⁵⁸ Importantly, it uses approaches and tools, notably a ‘power awareness tool,’⁵⁹ that explicitly acknowledge inherent power imbalances to help promote more equal relationships and trust between partners. Although it is too early to gauge its success, it nevertheless suggests that both major donors and INGOs must be willing to question and revise their funding and operating models, as well as dedicate the time and resource needed for this, if these sorts of attempts to take concrete action are to become the norm.

⁵³ Victoria Metcalfe-Hough, Wendy Fenton, Barnaby Willitts-King and Alexandra Spence, *Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report 2020*, Humanitarian Policy Group/ODI, (June 2020), <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/202012/Grand%20Bargain%20Annual%20Independent%20Report%202020.pdf>.

⁵⁴ See for example, Sophie Edwards, “Oxfam: Safeguarding failings laid bare,” *Devex* (12 June 2019): <https://www.devex.com/news/oxfam-safeguarding-failings-laid-bare-95082>; ITV, *Charity Abuse Scandal: Watchdog examining 80 claims*, (5 March 2018): <https://www.itv.com/news/2018-03-05/charity-abuse-scandal-watchdog-examining-80-claims>

⁵⁵ See Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, *Impact assessment: Cross-Sector and FCDO Progress Reports on Safeguarding Against Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Sexual Harassment (SEAH) 2019-2020*, (20 October 2020) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cross-sector-and-fcdo-progress-reports-on-safeguarding-against-sexual-exploitation-abuse-and-sexual-harassment-seah-2019-2020/>

⁵⁶ See for example, UK Parliament International Development Select Committee, *the Philosophy and Culture of Aid Inquiry*, (2021), <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1005/the-philosophy-and-culture-of-aid/>

⁵⁷ *Op cit*, note 53.

⁵⁸ Cordaid, *A New Partnership for a Just Future*, Press release. (3 June 2020). <https://www.cordaid.org/en/news/a-new-partnership-for-a-just-future/>

⁵⁹ <https://www.partos.nl/actueel/nieuws/artikel/news/start-shifting-the-power-with-the-power-awareness-tool/>

6.7 – Create and share knowledge and commit to mutual learning

For advocacy and communications, 2020 marked a proliferation of statements, reports, materials and webinars, all disseminated and conducted digitally. It was important to share information around COVID-19 and other priority themes, also to shape narratives and counter mis-information. Participants commented that they found audiences more receptive to their work than before and, thanks to digitalisation, had been able to attract more varied panels, and larger and more diverse audiences for meetings and briefings. One interviewee probably spoke for most in saying that it was better in many ways than the *“in-person events with a bunch of your friends in the room”* from pre-pandemic times.

For programmes, the ability to share information and learning with partners and communities depended greatly on the digital infrastructure and equipment available as noted above. Although digitalisation, where this was possible, also provided fresh opportunities for INGOs to participate directly in a wider range of partner meetings and bring more geographically dispersed groups together in focus groups.

There were some good examples of knowledge-sharing and mutual learning too. Like a number of INGOs, World Vision International (WVI) launched a real-time learning process on their COVID-19 response across the entire global federation. The scale of the exercise was unprecedented even for an organisation of that size. They received responses from over 3,000 staff and 600 partners, as well as inputs from community members to build a comprehensive picture of the effects and challenges of the pandemic and WVI's response to it.

The European Network on Debt and Development (Eurodad) developed a new online Knowledge Management Platform for its members and coalition partners in 2020, which proved particularly useful in the pandemic. The platform enables Eurodad to share research, toolkits, introductory content and more in-depth information on key thematic issues, as well as archives for the network's international work.

6.8 – Commit to realizing positive sustainable change

Participants acknowledged steps forward, for example key advances in digitalisation, which bode well for the future. They also repeated concerns about the negative impacts of the pandemic, especially the secondary impacts, and State and donor responses to these, notably the heightened attacks on civic space and concerns around funding in the sector. They were concerned about the effect these would have on CSOs' abilities to commit to realizing positive and sustainable change, particularly in the longer-term.

This period also prompted some to reflect on their work and approaches, including lessons from the past. One interviewee noted, for instance, how the pandemic had highlighted some serious gaps in past attempts to address development issues, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) being an example:

“After all that money that we put into WASH and all that strife [...], there are still significant gaps, meaning that something like a pandemic can threaten and make people vulnerable because they don't have access to water.”

Looking ahead, most emphasised the need to address the structural issues that COVID-19 has highlighted, noting that it was *“all still to play for.”* To that end, CSOs need to share a vision for what that should look like. One interviewee wondered whether crises were the 'new normal' that we would need to adapt to:

“We can't go back to [the 'old normal'] especially as this is not worst crisis, and it's not the last crisis that we are going to see.”

BOX 5: NEW AND EMERGING TRENDS

Interviewees pointed to a number of trends that emerged during the pandemic:

Crises: working across the divides to better address multiple crises

Attempts to reduce silos between sectors and approaches are not new, albeit having mixed success. Notably, the Grand Bargain agreed at the WHS in 2016 included initiatives to improve the coherence of humanitarian response, development and peace processes to end human suffering and ensure durable solutions under the so-called 'triple nexus'.⁶⁰

The COVID-19 crisis has, in its turn, shone a light on multiple crises facing humanity at this time: be that the climate emergency or crises of conflict or gender, prompting calls for the need to work 'across the divides' to create linkages between issues as a more effective approach to tackling each one. These have included calls to reinvigorate the triple nexus as previous health emergencies, such as the Ebola outbreak in the DRC, and COVID-19 is currently demonstrating, show that instability and underdevelopment make the impact of these emergencies worse, and set back the recovery. They have also given rise to new 'linked' campaigns, such as "Crack the Crises," a campaign bringing together organisations calling for action against the triple crises of COVID, injustice and climate change.⁶¹

The rise (and success) of grassroots protest movements

Protest movements to achieve change are nothing new. Despite lockdowns and other restrictions, however, marches and street protests, as well as social media campaigns, proliferated in 2020, notwithstanding the risks to health. Notably, Black Lives Matter protests swept the globe in the summer of 2020, and others included: anti-government protests decrying rigged presidential elections in Belarus following the re-election of Lukashenko; anti-abortion protests in Poland and Argentina; and youth-led protests in Nigeria calling for the disbanding of The Special Anti-Robbery Squad, a special police unit connected to brutality and serious human rights violations. Multiple demonstrations were also held against COVID-19 rules and restrictions to protest the wearing of masks, continued lockdowns and vaccinations. Likely heightened by the inequalities and structural injustices the pandemic highlighted and exacerbated, these movements - at their best - have drawn attention to serious issues and, in many cases, initiated change.

The 'virality' of misinformation

Another trend is the growing prevalence of misinformation and fake news that circulate primarily via social media and the internet on all manner of topics. The fact that it should become a feature of the pandemic caught many off guard as the 'virality of bad information' overtook scientific evidence and public health advice on many online platforms and social media threads. These posts questioned both the causes - and the very existence - of the pandemic, as well as questioning the efficacy or safety of vaccinations by 'anti-vax' activists, thereby hampering the effectiveness of the COVID-19 response. Some politicians, such as Presidents Trump in the US, Bolsonaro in Brazil and Magufuli in Tanzania, seriously downplayed the severity of COVID-19 and themselves fuelled false rumours with devastating effects for the populations they are supposed to serve.⁶²

⁶⁰ See World Humanitarian Summit 2016, the Agenda for Humanity: <https://agendaforhumanity.org/summit>

⁶¹ <https://crackthecrises.org>

⁶² Travis Waldron, "Bolsonaro Blames the Media as Coronavirus Worsens in Brazil," *The Huffington Post*, (12 March 2020) https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/jair-bolsonaro-coronavirus-brazil-trump_n_5e6a443cc5b6747ef1186cb3?ri18n=true; Nolan Quinn, "John Magufuli, Tanzania's COVID-Denying President, Dies," *Council on Foreign Relations* (18 March 2021). <https://www.cfr.org/blog/john-magufuli-tanzanias-covid-denying-president-dies>.

7 – CONCLUSION AND FINAL REFLECTIONS

7.1 – Conclusion

COVID-19, as well as many of the measures put in place to curb the spread of the virus, have threatened the lives, health and security of millions of people around the world, and have exposed and exacerbated already entrenched structural flaws in global systems. The Global South has been hardest hit by its effects, providing a major challenge for the development effectiveness community, among others, to respond. The pandemic is a stress test for development effectiveness principles for all GPEDC constituencies. It is also a challenge to the Global Partnership as a whole to secure a prominent role for itself in guiding next steps towards a just and sustainable recovery in the Global South and renewed impetus to regain lost ground to achieve the SDGs while leaving no one behind. Country ownership over the development process, inclusive development partnerships, transparency and mutual accountability, and a focus on results should take centre stage.

CSOs for their part were quick to take action. They have provided emergency relief and shared public health messages, continued to support rights holders as best they can in the face of the secondary impacts from job losses and food insecurity to domestic violence, and they have also performed their vital watchdog role. They did this while confronting major challenges themselves, not least the massive scale and highly complex nature of the problems and needs generated by the pandemic, particularly its secondary effects. While many governments welcomed CSOs into coordinated response efforts, a number used restrictive laws and measures to silence them and by-pass their support, ranging from violent crackdowns to withholding information and taking key decisions behind closed doors. While major donors were largely flexible, allowing CSOs to adapt programmes where possible to the health emergency especially, other areas, such as peace and security appear to have suffered, likely with lasting negative effects. As all economies were severely impacted, the long-term prospects for continued levels of ODA-support for CSOs looks bleak.

All CSOs have struggled in this context, but smaller national and local-level CSOs appear to have been the hardest hit. Funding levels have become critical, despite the increased need for their services, and many have struggled to survive. The quickened pace of digitalisation offered some reprieve: Zoom and Microsoft Teams enabled organisations to continue functioning and meetings to take place virtually. It also opened up new spaces for many CSOs to participate in international conferences they could not otherwise have attended. These opportunities were not available to all, however, further widening the digital divide between countries and communities and individuals within all countries. Finally, one year on, the effects of the pandemic have taken their toll on CSO staff too, whether that is through fears of attack, feelings of isolation and burnout from the pressures of work, or themselves falling sick or losing loved ones to COVID-19.

This study then focused more specifically on the effects of COVID-19 and State and donor responses to the pandemic on CSOs' ability to implement the eight Istanbul Principles. That is, the framework guiding the effectiveness of CSO operations as independent development actors in their own right. This period has created challenges (and some opportunities) for CSOs to implement all of the principles. On a positive note, it forced ICSSOs to reflect on the ways that they typically did business in the past, which has created some profound shifts. Notably, it is likely that, coming out of this, ICSSOs will travel much less and justify it better when they do (promoting environmental sustainability, IP4), and many will certainly benefit from the stronger relationships that they have built with existing partners over this period and be more open to cooperating closely with a wider range of groups (pursuing equitable partnerships and solidarity, IP6). Furthermore, a new reliance on digital tools has prompted creative solutions to problems, for example developing apps and using online platforms, that have enabled CSOs to continue supporting rights holders in new ways, as well as stay connected to partners.

However, this was not enough to reach many rights holders, particularly the most vulnerable, or make up for the scale of need. The disproportionate and myriad impacts of the crisis on the most vulnerable, including women and girls, posed particular challenges for CSOs to put respecting and promoting human rights and social justice (IP1) and women and girls' rights (IP2) into practice. The implementation of areas that tested many INGOs in particular in the past, notably pursuing equitable partnerships and solidarity (IP6), has continued to be a challenge. Despite relying more on existing partnerships and forging relationships with less traditional groups during the pandemic, prevailing

aid modalities in the sector, such as stringent donor requirements and how those funds are channelled, have remained largely unchanged. Consequently, these continued to be a barrier to shifting underlying power imbalances between INGO and national CSOs.

7.2 – Final reflections

A crisis of this scale and complexity inevitably throws up a multitude of questions and concerns, which, one year on, warrant deeper consideration. This final section highlights just some of those relating specifically to CSOs' ability to operate effectively in order to prompt further reflection, research and ultimately action on the part, primarily of ICSSOs and CPDE, but also of the GPEDC as a whole.

a. The 'pandemic of inequality'

The pandemic placed a spotlight on many issues, but none more so than pre-existing structural inequalities. The crisis not only exposed these, but also exacerbated them. As CPDE put it: "COVID-19 is a wake-up call to reverse inequality, a challenge to leave no one behind."⁶³ What is striking, however, is just how many of the challenges touched upon in this study were rooted in inequality. The relative impacts of the secondary effects, in particular, hit the Global South and the poorest and most vulnerable within societies hardest, while also making them the toughest for CSOs, and others, to reach. One positive aspect overall, of course, has been the digital tools that have helped to overcome many challenges, notably movement and physical distancing restrictions, and even provide creative new solutions to problems. They also widened divides, however, as they typically could not be accessed by those who were already marginalised, leaving these groups further excluded and left behind.

Inequality was also a marker in CSOs' own experiences of the pandemic: INGOs, although themselves negatively impacted by the pandemic, have been better equipped to weather the financial shocks or protect themselves against attacks and intimidation by repressive governments than their national and local counterparts have been in the Global South. For example, when offices were closed and bank accounts frozen, through access to legal services and alternative means of immediate financial support. Further, notwithstanding the critical role that national and local CSOs have played on the ground in responding to the pandemic, this does not appear yet to have led to greater equality in the relationships between INGOs and their national CSO partners.

b. Challenges for localisation and equitable partnerships

Furthermore, the question of shifting power and localisation, that is the decentralising, or localising, of power and the ownership of development initiatives, received greater attention in 2020. Notably, following waves of protests around systemic inequalities to do with race and ethnicity, the international aid sector was also forced to ask fundamental questions of itself, including the need to 'decolonise' international aid. This study suggests, however, that after many years, localisation and equitable partnerships, while supported as strongly in principle as ever, are still more talked about than acted upon. The level of specifications and restrictions imposed by major donors, who in turn have to justify their ODA expenditure to their parliaments and electorates, on grant and contract agreements is at least one barrier to achieving this. They seem to be 'two different philosophies' as one interviewee put it. By explicitly acknowledging that these inherent power imbalances exist, organisations can begin purposefully to address them. Above all, for localisation and equitable partnerships to be truly realized, major donors and INGOs alike have to agree and commit to doing things differently. This needs to lead to concrete action to explore, trial and adopt new approaches to funding and operating models.

c. Own house in order

In addition, the international aid community as a whole, but specifically here CSOs, need to be serious about tackling uncomfortable issues that remain within the sector, notably the need for more far-reaching improvements to key areas, such as safeguarding, gender equality, anti-racism and decolonisation. INGOs must develop and implement better structures and policies within their organisations to address these, as well as in their relationships with partners and rights holders. Donors must adopt modalities and approaches that support and encourage this. This should lead to stronger local empowerment and democratic ownership, and more effective development outcomes

⁶³ CPDE. "COVID-19 is a wake-up call to reverse inequality, a challenge to leave no one behind" Statement (25 March 2020) <https://csopartnership.org/2020/03/covid-19-is-a-wake-up-call-to-reverse-inequality-a-challenge-to-leave-no-one-behind/>

as a result. It is important for CSOs to put their house in order also to ensure their own legitimacy when they need to call out governments and other development actors.

d. Shrinking civic space

The increasingly hostile environment for CSOs is a worsening trend that must not be underplayed. Fundamental freedoms of people to associate, peacefully assemble and express their views and opinions are essential preconditions for effective development and achieving the SDGs, as is the ability of CSOs to operate freely and engage with governments and other development actors. The level of attacks, threats and intimidation of CSOs during the pandemic is alarming. It is a great concern too to learn of cases where governments have withheld information or refused to consult CSOs on key decisions and issues. These should be a concern for everyone involved in the GPEDC framework. Addressing this is not only vital for the safety of individuals, but also for the very credibility of GPEDC processes and the effectiveness of development outcomes.

e. ODA funding must target the poorest communities

The challenge to international development has never been greater as OECD estimates indicate that developing countries face a \$1.7 trillion USDs shortfall on the sums required to achieve the SDGs by 2030. This is at a time when, overall, ODA for poverty reduction and economic development in the Global South is at best stagnating, and at worst diminishing. This trend looks set to continue as economies worldwide have suffered as a result of COVID-19. In any event, the proportion of bi-lateral ODA disbursed to NGOs to this end is in decline. Increasing proportions are going to and via DFIs, and there is likely to be ever greater competing pressures placed on ODA budgets, notably for it to be spent on global public goods in the wake of this global pandemic and the impending climate crisis. All development partners, including CSOs, must ensure that ODA funding is targeted most effectively to support poverty reduction among the world's poorest and the achievement of the SDGs.

f. A window of opportunity

This has been a period of extended crisis, marked by multiple complex challenges. There have, however, been some positives that can be drawn from it. The one mentioned most often during the course of this study was the "awakening" that has taken place as authorities and individuals alike could see more clearly just how critical it is to address the underlying structural issues that CSOs have been campaigning on for years. This, and the need to invest in a major global economic recovery, offer CSOs a rare window of opportunity to formulate and communicate a clear vision for what that recovery should look like, what needs to change and how, and then a plan of action for CSOs to promote it together focusing on a few key priorities. But CSOs need to act quickly as this window will not remain open for long.

Annexe 1: Questions for further reflection and learning

The following questions are aimed at prompting further discussion and reflection among CSOs on the issues relating to CSOs' effectiveness in the wake of the pandemic that were highlighted in the final section of the report. CSOs are invited to consider these, and other questions that they wish to raise, to learn from each other, to help identify priorities and gaps and thereby determine next steps for further research and ultimately action.

1 - The 'pandemic of inequality'

- » In your experience, what have been the barriers to promoting human rights and social justice in your work during the pandemic? On the other hand, do you have positive examples?
- » In your experience, what have been the barriers to promoting the rights of women and girls during the pandemic? On the other hand, do you have positive examples?
- » What particular challenges did you experience during this time in reaching, as well as consulting and supporting the participation of rights holders in your plans, programmes and other work?
- » Did you, or the communities you work with, experience any challenges in accessing or using digital devices during the pandemic?
- » Were you able to use or adapt digital devices or services to better carry out your work during this period?
- » Do you support CSO partners and/or rights holders to know and claim their rights in relation to confidentiality and security online or individuals' personal data rights in relation to digital devices and the internet? Do you have any plans for doing this?

2 - Challenges for localisation and equitable partnerships

- » What has been your experience of working in partnership during the pandemic?
- » Have you worked with groups that you did not previously? If so, what were the main benefits of and the main challenges in doing this?
- » Can you think of other barriers to achieving equitable partnerships than those mentioned in the report?
- » Do you have examples of localisation and/or equitable partnerships working in practice? Why do you think they were successful?

3 - Own house in order

- » Have you discussed issues, such as anti-racism, decolonisation, safeguarding and gender equality, in your organisation?
- » Have you / has your organisation taken any steps to address these internally and/or in your approaches to partners and rights holders? If so, what steps have you taken and what have the results been?
- » Has there been funding to support these initiatives?

4 - Shrinking civic space

- » Have you experienced any threats, attacks or infringements to your work as a CSO during the pandemic?
- » If you experienced any threats, attacks or infringements to your work, were you able to counter them in any way? If so, can you share how you did this?
- » If you experienced any threats, attacks or infringements to your work, did you receive any support from elsewhere? If so, what support did you receive and from whom?
- » What do you think the CPDE and other CSOs can do best to support organisations and staff that are experiencing threats, attacks and infringements to their work?

5 - ODA funding must target the poorest communities

- » What sort of funding challenges has your organisation experienced during or as a result of the pandemic?
- » As the most vulnerable countries have been worst impacted by the effects of the pandemic, and will likely suffer most from climate change and other crises, what can be done within the development cooperation framework to help address these challenges?
- » ODA funding for NGOs looks set to decrease, how do donors and CSOs ensure that this funding is targeted where and how it is most needed to support poverty reduction and the achievement of the SDGs?

6 - A window of opportunity

- » What longer-term goal (or vision) for the recovery do you think CPDE should be seeking to achieve?
- » What two or three things do you think CPDE should prioritise in its advocacy towards the GPEDC and within the development effectiveness framework in the shorter-term in order to help achieve this goal?
- » What will you be prioritising in your advocacy and/or communications at local, national, regional or international level?
- » Who will you be targeting with your advocacy and/or communications?
- » Aside from CPDE, which other CSOs, allies and coalitions will you be working with on this?

Annexe 2: List of organisations whose representatives participated in the survey and/or interviews

Platforms/membership networks operating internationally

CIVICUS

La Fédération des OSC de Coopération au
Développement (ACODEV)

The Civil Society Platform for Peace-building and State-
building (CSPPS)

The Estonian Roundtable for Development Cooperation

The European Network on Debt and Development
(Eurodad)

The Norwegian Forum for Development and
Environment (ForUM)

The Trade Union Development Cooperation Network

ICSOs

Action Aid International

Act Church of Sweden, part of the Act Alliance

Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation

Care International UK

Cordaid

Development Initiatives

Gestos

IBON International

International Council for Caring Communities

Kopin

NGO Mondo

Publish What You Fund

The Făgăraș Research Institute

World Vision International

National CSOs and coalitions

Association for Promotion Sustainable Development,
India

Centre for Human Rights and Development, Mongolia

Forum de la Femme Ménagère (FORFEM) DRC

National Coalition of Civil Society Organizations, Liberia

Rural Infrastructure and Human Resource Development
Organization (RIHRDO), Pakistan

S.O.S. - Criança e Desenvolvimento Integral de Angola,
Angola

Southeast Indigenous Peoples' Center, USA

Women's Support and Information Centre NPO, Estonia

Annexe 3: List of materials supplied by study participants

CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE)

"World in Lockdown, Development on Hold: A special CPDE report on the (in)effectiveness of COVID-19 response" Report (April 2021). <https://csopartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CPDE-Global-Synthesis-World-in-Lockdown-Development-on-Hold-2021-EN-1.pdf>

"Civil Society Initiatives on Covid-19". Report (19 June 2020). <https://csopartnership.org/2020/06/results-of-cpde-survey-on-civil-society-initiatives-on-covid-19-out-now/>

"COVID-19 is a wake-up call to reverse inequality, a challenge to leave no one behind" Statement (25 March 2020) <https://csopartnership.org/2020/03/covid-19-is-a-wake-up-call-to-reverse-inequality-a-challenge-to-leave-no-one-behind/>

Platforms / Membership Networks

Bond UK

"12 Ways NGOs are Helping the World's Poorest During Covid-19," (9 June 2020). <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2020/06/12-ways-ngos-are-helping-the-worlds-poorest-during-covid-19>

"Programmes at risk as more NGOs face closure". Press release. (6 May 2020) <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2020/05/programmes-at-risk-as-more-ngos-face-closure>

CIVICUS

"Solidarity in the Time of COVID-19: Civil society responses to the pandemic" Report (November 2020) https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2020/solidarity-in-the-time-of-covid-19_en.pdf

"People Power under Attack: Civil society monitor 2020," (November 2020), <https://findings2020.monitor.civicus.org/index.html>.

"Civic Freedoms under Threat during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A snapshot of restrictions and resilience." Briefing (October 2020) <https://civicus.contentfiles.net/media/assets/file/CIVICUSMonitor.COVIDBriefOctober2020.pdf>

"Open letter: Donors and supporters must act to ensure civil society resilience against COVID-19 pandemic." Open letter (19 March 2020) <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/media-releases/open-letters/4346-open-letter-donors-and-supporters-must-act-to-ensure-civil-society-resilience-against-covid-19-pandemic>

Civil Society Platform for Peace-building and State-building (CSPPS)

"Fighting COVID-19, Building Peace: What local peacebuilders say about COVID-19, civic space, fragility and drivers of conflict." Report (13 July 2020) <https://cspps.org/Fighting-COVID19-Building-Peace-Report>

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Annexe 4: Previous CPDE ICSO constituency group studies

How Effective are International Non-Governmental Organisations? A study of INGO support of the development effectiveness agenda (CPDE, 2016) - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the run up to the second High Level Meeting of the Global Partnership for Development Effectiveness (GPEDC) at the end of 2016, it is timely to carry out an assessment of the level of support and recognition that the effectiveness agenda still generates at different levels. Understanding the traction that the effectiveness agenda has among International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) may be instrumental in mobilizing renewed interest in the light of the challenges stemming from the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

This study takes place within the activity framework of the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) INGO constituency group and is part of a broader global reflection by CPDE on CSO effectiveness. The study aims to provide a snapshot of whether INGOs still find the development effectiveness agenda relevant; how INGOs are implement effectiveness principles in practice and what INGOs think about the role and future mandate of the Global Partnership for Development Effectiveness (GPEDC) as well as the relevancy and representativeness of the CPDE. The study does not attempt to provide a comprehensive assessment of INGO implementation of the development effectiveness principles, which would require an independent external evaluation outside the scope of the Terms of Reference. Instead it forms part of a self-assessment exercise and is based on a survey and interviews with experts working in nine International NGOs.

MOVING FROM PRINCIPLES TO PRACTICE

The results of the study show that INGOs are aware of the effectiveness principles and are incorporating them into their own practices – albeit to varying degrees. While the organisations surveyed provided a wealth of case studies and best practice examples, neither of these appears to be consistently shared within the sector.

The findings would indicate that INGOs are successfully mainstreaming the effectiveness principles into their programmatic activities, however less so within their policy, advocacy and campaigning work. Less than half of the INGOs surveyed are including gender analysis, environmental sustainability and transparency in their advocacy and campaigning strategies.

The majority of INGOs are integrating core principles such as a human rights based approach, gender equality, transparency and access to information into their internal policies and practices. However the principles of democratic ownership, environmental sustainability and accountability towards multiple stakeholders are proving more challenging to implement.

CHALLENGES AND ENABLING FACTORS FOR PROGRESS

INGOs highlighted that donor funding and reporting requirements can have a significant impact on how the sector practices accountability and effectiveness. An organisational reliance on restricted funding from official donors can engender an emphasis on programmatic quality, donor reporting requirements and the need to deliver short-term results. As a result organisations will tend to be more accountable to the donors that fund them, rather than to the communities or affected populations with whom they work.

The extent to which an organisation is centrally governed, has strong leadership commitment to effectiveness principles or has developed common internal policies and mechanisms would appear to have a significant impact on its ability to implement this agenda across the organisation, including at local level. These issues are of particular importance, given the increasing number of INGOs that are devolving their governance structures.

Equitable partnerships is an area where INGOs are most acutely aware of their changing role in the development landscape and they recognize the need to be honest about the nature of their partnerships with local actors. The issue of INGO funding and how this impacts on the power dynamics of relationships with local partners is perceived as one of the main barriers to change in this area. Many respondents cited a dependence on donor funding as

limiting strategic support to partners. Other factors included an over-focus on risk avoidance and compliance, where local partners can be perceived as being risky; competition between national CSOs and INGOs over financing; and leadership skills and attitudes within organisations that fail to promote equitable partnerships.

RELEVANCY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS AGENDA AND GPEDC'S ADDED VALUE

INGOs consider that the Busan principles of country ownership, a results focus derived from local priorities, inclusive development partnerships and transparency and accountability continue to remain relevant within the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. However for the GPEDC to remain a relevant platform for engagement, it must ensure that it aligns its purpose with the mechanisms for both the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Financing for Development (FFD) outcomes and clarifies its added value within that framework.

INGOs emphasized the importance of the GPEDC's role in monitoring implementation of commitments on effective development cooperation offering a unique tool to hold stakeholders, particularly governments accountable for their commitments. More efforts are needed to provide meaningful evidence on what makes development cooperation effective and to strengthen international commitments by linking global and national discussions and ensuring these are grounded in existing consultation and accountability mechanisms at country level.

The role of the Global Partnership as a multi-stakeholder platform, enabling CSO engagement in policy dialogue as reflected by civil society's equal role in its governance structure, was also identified as a priority. However organisations highlighted limited resources and competing processes and platforms as factors limiting their capacity for engagement with the GPEDC. For many, the extent to which governments are investing in the Global Partnership and its ability to demonstrate change in development practices is a key driver in determining their organisational engagement.

CPDE'S ROLE IN THE GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

The majority of INGOs are aware of the activities of the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness and highlighted CPDE's success in building a broad coalition of grass-roots, local, national and international civil society organisations working in this area. INGOs emphasized CPDE's important role in updating and consulting its membership on on-going discussions within the Global Partnership and influencing policy at global and country levels while recognizing the challenges that this represents.

However just under half of the respondents surveyed felt that the INGO constituency was not sufficiently represented within CPDE with a number of organisations expressing concerns that by acting as a "gatekeeper" the CSO Partnership is restricting broader CSO participation within the GPEDC. It was suggested that the CPDE reaches out beyond its current membership base, enables CSOs to engage more freely in the Global Partnership, channelling or amplifying these initiatives where appropriate and possible.

Accelerating the Implementation of the Istanbul Principles by INGOs in a Changing Development Landscape (CPDE, 2019) - EXCERPT: KEY BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTATION

Istanbul Principle 3: Focus on people's empowerment, democratic ownership and participation

Key barriers to implementation

- » INGOs own structures and procedures, partly set by donor expectations or internal governance models such as in INGO families, are not always geared to allow meaningful stakeholder participation and input to determine organisational priorities, especially at a higher strategic level.
- » Many INGO approaches still appear to be informed by the misconception that local actors, particularly in fragile states and humanitarian contexts, are characterised by weak capacity and limited contextual knowledge.
- » Public messaging by INGOs in the North contributes to perpetuate this misperception. Often driven by humanitarian crises, and within the context of dwindling public funding, INGOs themselves have been keen to suggest that solutions are cheap and easy. They have portrayed local people as victims and external agencies as 'saviours' inadvertently contributing to weak public understanding of development as empowerment. This affects both INGO programme priorities and approaches, as well as contributing to shape the attitudes of representatives in governance bodies, particularly those from the North.
- » An increased focus on compliance with donor requirements, coupled with tight programming timeframes, also limit the ability of INGOs to use participatory, bottom-up approaches empowering affected communities to genuinely set the agenda.
- » Stringent donor scrutiny and an emphasis on results have tended to accentuate INGOs' risk averseness, making them reluctant to engage in what might be considered high-risk activities or partnerships, and stifling their capacity to innovate.

Istanbul Principle 4: Promote environmental sustainability

Key barriers to implementation

- » INGOs appear to still not be walking the talk on environmental sustainability as this is not consistently enshrined in organisational policies.
- » Climate resilience and adaptation are often seen and organised as a separate sphere of programming and advocacy from INGO on-going development programming and advocacy priorities. While there is a legitimate argument for climate finance to be additional, there is no programmatic rationale for it to be distinct from sustainable approaches in any given sector.
- » In some cases, this has caused inconsistencies in corporate social responsibility policies between and within INGOs leading to tensions over the acceptance of corporate funding. With growing private sector engagement in development cooperation and INGOs growing role in interventions resourced through climate finance it is likely these tensions will be accentuated.

Istanbul Principle 5: Practice transparency and accountability

Key barriers to implementation

- » Increased INGO transparency appears to be largely donor-driven rather than initiated by INGOs themselves. To date, three European governments, the UK, The Netherlands and Belgium, have made introduce mandatory rules for organisations receiving their aid to report their spending to IATI (International Aid Transparency Initiative).
- » Increased scrutiny, more stringent statutory requirements on INGOs and short timeframes of donor-funded programming have strengthened donor-centric accountability at the expense of "downward accountability" to local stakeholders.
- » Lower trust in INGOs following safeguarding and mismanagement scandals and their engagement in migration has further increased donor scrutiny of INGOs.

Istanbul Principle 6: Pursue equitable partnerships and solidarity

Key barriers to implementation

- » Many larger INGOs are multi-mandate organisations and they increasingly operate in their countries in the North as well as in most developing countries in the South. This is causing increasing competition over scarce donor resources between INGOs and domestic CSOs. INGOs increased dependence on donor funding also contributes to skewing and limiting their strategic support of partners.
- » Compliance to donor regulations and conditionalities in many instances prevents INGOs from providing adequate core and sustainable funding to partners. Moreover, an exaggerated emphasis on risk avoidance and compliance may lead to some local partners being perceived as too risky by donors and therefore often by INGOs too.
- » The shift in discourse that has seen a change in the perception of INGOs by donors from partners to project implementers is not conducive to INGOs establishing equal partnerships with local partners, which are often still treated as sub-contractors.
- » INGOs' weak or inconsistent leadership skills, structures and internal planning cycles and mechanisms have failed to support adequate input from partners nurturing equitable partnerships.

CSOPartnership 
for Development Effectiveness