CSO Partnership
for **Development Effectiveness**

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

A CPDE ICSO study on the impacts of the pandemic

April 2021

About the research

▶ This report offers a snapshot from the point of view primarily of International Civil Society Organizations (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.

▶ Initiated by the ICSO constituency group of the CPDE, it forms part of the activity framework of the CPDE.

▶ This report builds on a number of previous studies

Methodology and limitations

- The research took place during February and March 2021, and comprised an online survey circulated among about 700 CSO stakeholders from INGOs, regional and national platforms, membership networks, and national CSOs, and semi-structured interviews involving eleven organizations.

- The research has been publicly presented during the CPDE global webinar "World in lockdown, development on hold", 31st March 2021

- It is a snapshot based on the personal reflections of a small number of active 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. Moreover, The contribution of each participant reflected their own perceptions and experiences.

Main Impacts for CSOs

▶ **Limitations to CSOs' operating environment:**
The crisis has provided the "perfect cover" for repressive governments to crack down on fundamental freedoms and entrench their positions further. 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.

▶ **Digitalisation**
All those interviewed found the digitalization had had some great benefits for their ability to function effectively as well as significant drawbacks. Physical distancing constraints and limitation to movement brought about new ways of working that, however, dramatically expanded the digital divide. 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.

▶ **Funding**
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 the meet the needs of the crisis. Although their processes for achieving this could be slow and over-bureaucratic. Furthermore, interviewees have been planning for ODA spending channelled through NGOs to stagnate or, at worst, decrease sharply in future in line with current trends. 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.

▶ **Impacts on staff**
A year into the crisis, many admitted to feelings of isolation, stress and burnout due to the increased and more challenging workload and juggling greater caring responsibilities at home or others taking on colleagues' workloads to enable them better to cope with those. 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.

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.

▶ 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.

▶ 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.

❖ **IP1: Respect and promote human rights and social justice**
The chief problem the interviewed 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.

❖ **IP2: Embody gender equality and equity while promoting women and girls' rights**
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 rises in domestic violence and additional caring responsibilities. By the same token, cuts to aid programmes generally are likely to impact women and girls disproportionately too.

❖ **IP3: Focus on people's empowerment, democratic ownership and participation**
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. The digital divide notwithstanding, creative digital solutions have helped to reach and facilitate engagement with local populations in some cases.

❖ **IP4: Promote environmental sustainability**
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.

❖ **IP5: Practice transparency and accountability**
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. 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.
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.

- **IP6: Pursue equitable partnerships and solidarity**
  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. In addition, 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 (hostile environment, funding, digital divide), which has exacerbated already pre-existing inequalities. However, there is a positive side-effect of pandemic constraints, it has 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.

- **IP7: Create and share knowledge and commit to mutual learning**
  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.

- **IP8: Commit to realizing positive sustainable change**
  Participants acknowledged steps forward, for example key advances in digitalization but they also repeated concerns about the negative impacts of the pandemic, 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.

Final reflections

- «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.

- This study suggests, 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 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.

- The increasingly hostile environment for CSOs is a worsening trend that must not be underplayed.

- 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.

- A window of opportunity is open to the CSOs to formulate and communicate a clear vision for what that recovery should look like, what needs to change and how.