Changing approaches to civil society partnerships in development co-operation – Enabling locally led development

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Abstract

Providers of international development co-operation and humanitarian assistance have long supported the work of civil society organisations (CSOs) in a range of roles from watchdog to service provider to agents of democratisation. In 2022, 25 billion USD of Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members' official development assistance (ODA) flowed to CSOs, an average of 12% of ODA.

However, a series of crises in recent years is changing the development co-operation environment and the place of CSOs in it. The geopolitical landscape is not what it was at the birth of ODA over sixty years ago. There is growing mistrust of ODA providers among governments and citizens in ODA recipient countries, exacerbated by these providers' response to Russia's war in Ukraine perceived as disproportionate relative to their response to conflict elsewhere in the world. Traditional ODA providers compete for influence with newer providers such as China in a context of rising autocratisation around the globe. CSOs see the space in which they can operate shrinking in many parts of the world, inclusive of accusations of foreign agentry. On top of the above crises, critiques of the status quo stemming from movements such as Me Too, Black Lives Matter, Decolonisation and Shift the Power are increasingly applied to international development co-operation. Overall, there is pushback against ODA providers and the CSOs that they support. Providers of ODA and CSOs have been called on to rethink and retool their roles and ways of working. In this regard, locally led development is the latest trend with increasing commitments from providers and CSOs alike.

Alongside the shift in rhetoric toward locally led development, shifts in policy and practice come with significant changes for international CSOs and those in partner countries. This paper points to examples of such changes taking place in the development co-operation and humanitarian assistance sphere. It explores implications and the tensions that need to be considered for a transition to more locally led development co-operation with civil society that enables a vibrant and diverse civil society able to maximise its contribution to development and democracy.

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Introduction

Providers of international development co-operation and humanitarian assistance have long supported the work of civil society organisations (CSOs) in a range of roles from watchdog to service provider to agents of democratisation. In 2022, 25 billion USD of Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members' official development assistance (ODA) flowed to CSOs, an average of 12% of ODA (OECD, 2024[1]).

A series of crises in recent years and a changing geo-political landscape is altering the development co-operation environment and the place of CSOs in it. Providers (also referred to as "official donors" of ODA (also referred to as "aid"), and provider country and international CSOs (hereafter referred to jointly as "international CSOs") are being called on to rethink and retool their roles and ways of working (Saskia and Carothers, 2019[2]; Dodsworth and Cheeseman, 2018[3]). Locally led development which places partner country actors in a leading role is the latest trend with increasing commitments from providers and CSOs alike. In 2016, the multi-stakeholder signatories to the Grand Bargain committed to provide at least 25% of humanitarian funding to local actors "as directly as possible" (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2016, p. 5[4]). Following evidence of low progress on this and other Grand Bargain targets, in 2021 signatories reinvigorated the Bargain's commitments through Grand Bargain 2.0 (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, n.d.[5]). Among providers, twenty-one DAC members and twenty-two foundations have signed on to the Donor Statement on Supporting Locally Led Development (USAID, 2022[6]). All thirty-two DAC members have committed to the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance, an OECD legal instrument in which enabling local CSO leadership is prevalent (OECD, 2021[7]).

Among CSOs, thirteen international CSOs have signed onto the Pledge for Change which contains multiple commitments to more locally led ways of working, including through more equitable partnerships and authentic story-telling, and is accompanied by an accountability framework (Pledge for Change, 2022[8]). Others have joined forces with local CSOs in the Reimaging International Non-governmental Organisation (RINGO) project, which aims to affect change through research, community building and prototype design and testing (Rights CoLab, 2024[9]). These CSO commitments are both pre-dated by the CSO-led Charter for Change endorsed by over 450 local organisations and signed by 39 international CSOs, established by CSOs in response to the Grand Bargain (Charter for Change, n.d.[10]).

Alongside the shift in rhetoric, shifts in policy and practice come with significant changes for international CSOs and those in partner countries. This paper points to examples of such

changes taking place in the development co-operation and humanitarian assistance sphere. It explores the implications and the tensions that need to be considered for a transition to more locally led development co-operation with civil society that enables a vibrant and diverse civil society able to maximise its contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals while protecting civic space.

Literature review

The place of the development co-operation system has changed substantially since the post World War II birth of ODA over sixty years ago. Much needed pathways to change are under debate. Aid budgets are under pressure due to compounding crises and to a turning inward in provider countries faced by economic pressures and instability in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic (Kiernan, Turroques and Ahmad, 2024[11]; OECD, 2023[12]). In today's global geopolitical landscape, there is growing mistrust of ODA providers among governments and citizens in ODA recipient countries, exacerbated by these providers' response to Russia's war in Ukraine perceived as disproportionate relative to their response to conflict elsewhere in the world (OECD, 2023[12]). Traditional ODA providers compete for influence with newer providers such as China in a context of rising autocratisation around the globe (Alizada et al., 2021[13]; Boese et al., 2022[14]). CSOs see the space in which they can operate shrinking in many parts of the world, inclusive of accusations of foreign agentry alongside restrictive regulations, in some instances exacerbated by regulations geared to tackle effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (CIVICUS, 2022[15]; Dupuy and Prakash, 2020[16]; International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2020[17]). Overall, there is pushback against ODA providers and the CSOs that they support (Dupuy, Ron and Prakash, 2016[18]; DeMattee, 2019[19]), in and of itself a crisis for development cooperation CSOs.

On top of the above crises, critiques of the status quo stemming from movements such as Me Too, Black Lives Matter, Decolonisation and Shift the Power are relevant and increasingly applied to international development co-operation, also stirring crisis in the CSO sector. Structural racism and the legacy of colonialism are seen to characterise the aid system (Acharya, 2022[20]; Currion, 2020[21]; Fellow and Paige, 2021[22]; International Development Committee, 2022[23]; The New Humanitarian, 2020[24]), leading to calls for actors in that system to do more to shift decision-making power and resources to local actors in partner countries. Local CSOs' continuation of development cooperation operations during Covid-19 lockdowns when international CSOs lost their cross-border mobility "challenged the assumption that ICSOs [international CSOs] are

essential to address crises in the 'Global South'" (Hutchings and Vannucchi, 2022[25]). The influx of DAC country and international CSOs (hereafter referred to jointly as "international CSOs") into Ukraine at the expense of relatively well-established Ukrainian CSOs shone light on the issue of power and resource imbalances and inefficiencies in ODA for CSOs (Noe and Lang, 2023[26]).

While locally led development (also referred to as 'localisation' amongst other terms) is not a new concept, this confluence of factors has given it new momentum. And even as there is limited empirical evidence of the qualitative and quantitative benefits of locally led development (Cabot Venton, 2022[27]), the advantages of shifting decision-making around aid closer to its intended 'beneficiaries' are logical and intuitive. Cabot Venton et al. (2022[27]) list benefits that derive from local CSOs' proximity to or even embeddedness in local communities, such as: identification and inclusion of vulnerable people; existing relations of trust; ease of access; speed, timeliness and responsiveness; engagement with community voice; and sustainability. Locally led development is also seen as potentially bringing efficiencies into the aid system by reducing the layers or intermediation from provider to the ultimate 'beneficiaries' (OECD, 2023[28])

Ultimately, the demand from Global South CSOs for greater agency in the context of their engagement with the international development cooperation system, while not new, is seeming to be heard by providers and international CSOs alike like never before. Policy and practice changes are following, however incrementally and unevenly. There may be hope; a global study of CSO responses to the Covid-19 pandemic shows that CSOs can indeed adapt, innovate and transform in response to crisis in ways that shape their roles and relations (Garcia, 2023[29]). This paper explores some of the key adaptations that international CSOs and the providers that fund them are implementing in the face of the above crises and the implications that need consideration going forward.

Methodology and limitations

This paper draws from OECD research and analysis primarily undertaken for an OECD Development Co-operation Directorate Locally Led Peer Learning exercise, and from toolkits developed to support adherents to the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society to implement the Recommendation. The Peer Learning was launched as a way for DAC members to share approaches to locally led development. It took place over twelve months from mid-2023 to mid-2024. Primary sources for the peer learning were three DAC member case studies (Canada, Ireland and Switzerland); three partner country deep dives (Colombia, Ethiopia and Nepal); six thematic deep dives; and a series of multi-stakeholder peer learning consultation

events. Development of the toolkits involved desk research and consultations with DAC members through the DAC Community of Practice on Civil Society, with CSOs from around the globe and with foundations and has been ongoing since early 2022.

The definition of locally led development used for this paper is that of the Peer Learning exercise, as follows: “an ongoing development process where diverse local actors exercise agency across development policy and programme dimensions (framing, design, delivery, accountability) in given local operating contexts” (OECD, 2024, p. 10[30]). The definition of local CSO is that of the Funding Civil Society in Partner Countries toolkit, as follows: “an organisational representation that include all not-for-profit, non-state, non-partisan, non-violent, and self-governing organisations outside of the family, in which people come together to pursue shared needs, ideas, interests, values, faith, and beliefs, including formal, legally registered organisations and informal associations without legal status but with a structure and activities based in partner countries. Provider-country or international CSOs from the Global North that are either based in provider or other Global North countries or have branches or bases in partner countries are not considered as local CSOs” (OECD, 2023, p. 55[28]).

There are limitations to this exploratory paper. The paper contains examples of shifts toward locally led development derived from the above two exercises of peer learning and toolkit development; they are far from exhaustive. The examples are featured here to illustrate some key areas of change taking place, to elicit reflections on tensions and implications.

Policy and practice shifts

While there are many discussions and commitments on locally led taking place globally, and ample analysis of what needs to be done and obstacles to getting there, policy and practice changes remain nascent (Accelerating Localisation through Partnerships, 2022[31]). Still, some noteworthy changes are happening, organised here in five categories: directing funding of local CSOs; local leadership and complementary role-seeking; capacity strengthening; cost coverage and funding quality; and administrative and financial requirements.

Direct funding of local CSOs

An obvious first choice for providers committed to locally led development in their civil society partnerships would be to provide more of their civil society funding directly to local CSOs. Without providing a target, the Donor Statement on Supporting Locally Led Development commits to “channel high quality funds as directly as possible” (USAID, 2022[6]). A growing number of

providers are backing commitments such as to the Grand Bargain, the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society, and the Donor Statement on Supporting Locally Led Development with their own institutional targets. In 2021, USAID announced a target of 25% of its ODA to be channelled directly to local CSOs (USAID, 2021[32]). Australia's new International Development Policy commits to supporting local leadership, including funding local actors (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023[33]). In 2024, Sweden issued a new Strategy for Sweden's Development Cooperation with Civil Society which emphasizes strengthening local civil society (Government of Sweden, 2024[34]). Accompanying the Strategy is a new CSO funding mechanism open to global competition, in stark contrast to the previous mechanism which tied funding to 17[1] Swedish CSOs and their partnerships with local CSOs. Of the 1,044 expressions of interest received by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) in May 2024, 862 are from local CSOs (Danaiya Usher, 2024[35]). While Sida's decision on the winning fund recipients is still pending, the organization has proposed that between 10-15% of the funding envelope should go directly to local CSOs.

Data suggests that providers have a long way to go to shift to more direct funding of local CSOs. Between 2020 and 2021, the share of humanitarian funds going directly to local actors actually decreased from 4.1% to 1.7% (Metcalfe-Hough, 2022[36]). In 2022, 90% of DAC members' ODA for CSOs went to international CSOs, with the 10% balance going to local CSOs (OECD, 2024[1]). While this 10% is an increase from 2020's 7% of ODA for CSOs going to local CSOs, change is slow. In 2024, the #ShiftThePower movement issued an open letter to the DAC calling for its members to end the systematic imbalance between the disproportionately high funding for DAC country CSOs versus for local CSOs (#ShiftThePower Movement, 2024[37]).

There are ways other than direct funding of local CSOs that providers and international CSOs are pursuing toward more locally led development. The remainder of this section illustrates changes being pursued in the international CSO – local CSO partnership relationship to alter the power imbalance that dominates those relationships.

Local leadership and complementarity of roles

International CSOs have long been seen to have a tendency to treat local CSOs instrumentally, as implementing agents on behalf of international CSOs (and providers) (OECD, 2020[38]). Local CSOs are demanding collaborative and mutually beneficial partnerships in which they have more leadership and engagement in decision-making, with a transition to ever-more local leadership and autonomy over time (RINGO, 2021[39]; Peace Direct, 2023[40]). Changes are happening in international CSOs' ways of working with local CSOs so that the latter have more leadership and

agency in these partnerships. Some of these changes are self-motivated, some are responding to local CSOs' demands, and some are incentivised or required by the funding providers. An example of the latter is Ireland's Civil Society Partnership for a Better World funding mechanism, under which Irish CSOs have been required to submit locally led development policies and report progress on their implementation, as well as reporting on locally led development benchmarks negotiated with local CSO partner input (OECD, 2024[41]; OECD, 2024[30]). Denmark is also requiring its Danish CSO partners to report on their plans to strengthen the leadership of their local partners (OECD, 2024[30]). In a growing number of its funding agreements with Swiss CSOs, Switzerland is supporting a phased approach where over time local CSOs take over the lead from the Swiss CSOs, with the latter providing specific, tailored support for the local CSOs (OECD, 2024[41]).

The international CSO Trócaire has established a Global Hub on Partnership and Localisation to guide its head office and country offices to transition to a more locally led approach, providing strategic, technical, networking, and learning and research support. It has developed a Partnership in Practice guide detailing steps to be taken in the short and medium term and is explicit that Trócaire's role will evolve over the next five to ten years (Trócaire, 2019[42]). Another Irish CSO, GOAL, has adopted a local systems approach in which it acts as a facilitator to co-design and implement programming with diverse local actors, starting first by mapping local actors, their relationships and resilience using GOAL's Resilience for Social Systems assessment (OECD, 2024[30]; GOAL, 2023[43]). Over time, GOAL intends to move away from direct delivery and emphasize partnerships and greater allocation of resources to local actors (OECD, 2024[44]).

Stopping as Success (SAS) is an initiative providing tools and lessons to support international CSOs transition to become local, autonomous, or semi-autonomous CSOs. Through twenty cases, SAS documents various approaches and actions undertaken by international CSOs and their local partners for successful transition. In one such case, OXFAM Great Britain exited from the Republic of Georgia after establishing a spin-off Georgian CSO, BRIDGE. Lessons from the transition include: a decision and steps taken to transition early, in parallel with OXFAM's ongoing work to maintain momentum; direct involvement of dedicated local staff in decision-making and transparency for ownership and trust in the process; the provision of customized and broad-based support, including continued sharing of knowledge and expertise after the transition; and establishment of a sound and trusted governance structure (Ibramashvilli, 2019[45]).

Greater emphasis on local leadership is also leading to the creation of alternative types of intermediaries between providers and local CSOs. For example, the Equality Fund grew out of a collective of international CSOs led by Match International with funding from Global Affairs. After nurturing the creation of the Fund, these CSOs took a back seat leaving a new intermediary organisation that, though registered in Canada, is directed by activists from around the globe and that provides sustainable funds to feminist organisations in partner countries worldwide based on a funding model designed jointly with them (Equality Fund, 2022[46]). In another example, the Foundation for Civil Society is a local on-granting and capacity-building CSO in Tanzania that grew out of a DfID-funded grant scheme originally managed by CARE International (OECD, 2024[41]).

Revisiting capacity strengthening

For the most part, the traditional method of development cooperation with civil society has seen providers fund international CSOs to in turn partner with local CSOs and 'build' the latter's capacity as if from the ground up. Much of this capacity building has been designed and delivered in a top-down way, often focusing on local CSOs' capacity to meet certain requirements related to delivering the provider-funding programmes (OECD, 2020[38]). Locally led development calls for systems thinking versus a linear approach to capacity strengthening (Green, 2015[47]). It requires beginning from understanding and appreciating local CSOs' existing capacity and own identification of what capacity gaps they may want to strengthen, their operating context and risks, all with long-term sustainability in mind. Ideally, locally led development means that international CSOs aim to understand the full institutional realities and contexts of their local CSO partners, not solely the realities that are pertinent to a specific programme (Rights CoLab and West Africa Civil Society Institute, 2021[48]).

Switzerland for example is moving away from the deficit model of capacity development to one that both draws from existing capacities and responds to the capacity priorities of local partners, CSOs and otherwise (OECD, 2024[30]). USAID's new Local Capacity Strengthening Policy outlines principles to guide the agency and its CSO partners to undertake more strategic and intentional capacity strengthening supported through partnerships of mutual trust and reciprocity (USAID, 2022[49]). The Policy recognises that sustainable capacity strengthening must be tailored to local partners' needs and context, in other words, a "best fit" rather than a "good practice" approach is required (2022, p. 7[49]).

Some international CSOs are revisiting their capacity development approaches. Trócaire for example accompanies its local CSO partners' capacity strengthening based on capacity

assessments that are led and owned by the local partners. Peer-to-peer capacity strengthening strategies are applied including peer coaching among partners, learning exchange visits, and sharing of technical resources (Trócaire, 2019[42]). In its work with social movements in partner countries, ActionAid Denmark applies an approach to capacity strengthening that ensures tailoring to different movements' assets, needs, and pace. Their Global Organising and Leadership Development (GOLD) programme is based on the premise that capacity strengthening can be targeted for the particular and self-assessed stage that a movement is at in its life cycle, thus varying approaches between entry, growth, momentum and transformation stages (ActionAid, nd[50]). ActionAid works with their CSO partners to make varied tools, webinars and workshops available, as well as self-paced online courses (ActionAid, 2024[51]). The Work: No Child's Business programme is implemented by a coalition of UNICEF Netherlands, Save the Children Netherlands, the Stop Child Labour Coalition, and their partner organisations in six countries. The programme has developed a guide on advancing research partnerships through localization. The guide endeavors to address that research has tended to be skewed toward international leadership and to limit local CSOs' abilities to "work from their own contextual understandings and locally-defined knowledge questions", which "delegitimizes research that Southern organizations can do, thereby disqualifying relevant, contextual knowledge and capacities" (Lijfering, Rajeshwari and Wessel, 2021, p. 3[52]). The guide's five principles are geared to aid CSOs to advance locally led development by: embracing diversity; building on existing capacities; exchange and mutual learning; addressing power; and diversifying funding.

A further development in the capacity strengthening space is the use of third-party organisations that offer either capacity strengthening or undertake services on behalf of CSOs. The Local Coalition Accelerator Model for example facilitates the creation of coalitions of local actors, supporting them over three to five years with a shared governance system, peer-to-peer capacity sharing, and other services. Operating in five countries with funding from various foundations, the aim is for the coalitions to become independent with the capacity to access funding directly (The Share Trust, n.d.[53]). The Global Development Incubator runs a Shared Services Platform based in East Africa that provides financial management, compliance, grant reporting and other support to partner country CSOs, which helps the latter meet provider requirements while also building the CSOs' track record and capacities (Global Development Incubator, 2024[54]).

Covering real costs, quality of funding

A long-standing experience of local CSOs is that of not receiving sufficient cost coverage for the work they undertake, whether in their partnerships with international CSOs or directly with

providers (Boyes-Watson and Bortcosh, 2022[55]; Kuloba-Warria and Tomlinson, 2023[56]). Insufficient funding of local CSOs' overhead costs is a particular concern as it draws CSOs into a "starvation cycle" of under-investment in core organisational infrastructure and capabilities such as in fundraising, human resource management, long-term strategic planning, and basic operational functioning, thus undermining their sustainability (Gregory and Howard, 2009[57]; Boyes-Watson and Bortcosh, 2022[55]). The quality of funding is also important, with funding that is long-term, predictable, and flexible most conducive to enabling local CSOs' leadership and agency in determining and implementing initiatives that are suitable to their contexts, and in adapting to changing contexts (OECD, 2023[28]). Members of the DAC have a long way to go in this regard, with less than 10% of their total 2022 ODA flows for CSOs provided as core support (OECD, 2024[1]). Local CSOs testify that their access to such funding, whether directly from providers or via international CSOs, is extremely limited (Kuloba-Warria and Tomlinson, 2023[56]; OECD, 2024[30]; Boyes-Watson and Bortcosh, 2022[55]).

Awareness of the negative impact of inequitable cost coverage on local CSOs' strength and sustainability appears to be on the rise, and full coverage of local CSOs' programme and overhead cost coverage, is increasingly seen. For example, Switzerland has integrated principles of fair partnership in its agreements with international CSO intermediaries, inclusive of a principle of full coverage of local partners' costs of leadership, program management, financial administration, and premises (OECD, 2024[58]). In the UK Foreign, Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO) and Comic Relief Shifting the Power programme, there is a commitment to funding local CSO partners' full programming costs including overheads, to level the playing field for the diverse participating CSOs and contribute to their sustainability (FCDO, 2020[59]; FCDO, 2022[60]). As regards the quality of funding, there are examples of core support to international CSOs enabling them to in turn provide support to local CSOs that is flexible, multi-year, and responsive to local CSOs' mandates and priorities, such as Canada's Women's Voice and Leadership Programme, or the Australia-Indonesia Partnerships Towards an Inclusive Society programme (OECD, 2024[30]), though passing on flexibility of funding remains rare (Accelerating Localisation through Partnerships, 2022[31]).

Some providers are putting in place thresholds for the levels of funding that their international CSO partners must pass on to their local CSO partners, such as Denmark's 80% threshold (OECD, 2024[30]). In other instances, without necessarily placing thresholds on the level of funds to be passed-on, some providers require international CSOs to report their respective pass-on levels as is the case with Sida (Sida, 2019[61]; Sida official, 2024[62]). This practice remains uncommon however, including in contexts such as Ukraine where commitments to locally led

development are high (Noe and Lang, 2023[26]). In its Annual Reports, Trócaire reports on the share of funds it passes on, though the figure is not disaggregated by programme (Trócaire, 2019[42]). At present, there is no method to track the pass-on share of providers' international CSO funding (#ShiftThePower Movement, 2024[63]; OECD, 2020[38]).

As regards overhead costs specifically, Australia has introduced a requirement for Australian CSOs funded under the NGO Cooperation Program to pass down a minimum amount of the funds they receive to their local partners to use for administrative and overhead costs. Similarly, Canada, under its International Humanitarian Assistance Funding Guidelines, allows inclusion of budget lines specifically for local CSOs' indirect costs in the amount of up to 7.5% of the programme budget (OECD, 2024[41]). Denmark more generally allows portion of funds received by Danish CSOs to cover local partner CSOs' overheads (OECD, 2024[30]). The Norwegian Refugee Council has put in place a policy of requesting of their funders the same level of administrative cost coverage for their CSO partners as for themselves, and where providers do not comply, the Council will provide over 50% of the administrative coverage they receive to their local partner (Danaiya Usher, 2023[64]). Terre des Hommes (TdH) Switzerland is also advocating with its funders to provide administrative cost coverage for TdH partners proportionate to the amount TdH itself receives, while also increasing the share of funds it passes on to local partners (Terre des Hommes, 2023[65]).

Simplifying administrative and financial requirements

Providers' administrative and financial requirements, also referred to as due diligence requirements, related to funding applications, monitoring, reporting, and auditing, tend to burdensome for providers and CSOs alike (OECD, 2020[38]). Onerous requirements and the procedures that accompany them mean CSOs can spend an inordinate amount of time meeting the requirements of the various providers that fund them, at the expense of implementing their core work and achieving results with communities. International CSOs tend to replicate onerous administrative and financial requirements, passing them on to their local CSO partners, sometimes even adding requirements or making them more rigid (Partos, 2022[66]; (n.a.), 2013[67]). Local CSOs find that such requirements, including pressures for short-term, unrealistic results reporting, are detrimental to their efficiency and sustainability (RINGO, 2021[39]). Heavy requirements pose a barrier to access funds, whether indirectly from international CSOs or directly from providers, for many local CSOs and are seen as an "invisible paths for the continued exercise of ICSO power" (Kuloba-Warria and Tomlinson, 2023, p. 53[56]; Accelerating Localisation through Partnerships, 2022[31]).

Streamlining administrative and financial requirements would appear to be a relatively easy 'fix' in the grand scheme of the moving towards more locally led development. However, the role of these requirements in providers' and international CSOs' domestic accountability and their entrenchment within large bureaucratic standards and processes make change challenging. Requirements are set in a context of low-risk appetite among providers alongside a perception, however unfounded, that local CSOs are high risk partners (Baguios et al., 2021[68]).

Still, some pockets of effort are being seen. For example, in 2022, Canada launched a Grants and Contributions Transformation Initiative to transform its international assistance grants and contributions system so that it is more "responsive, effective, transparent and accountable" (OECD, 2024, p. 45[30]). The initiative is being informed through consultations with Global Affairs Canada partners, including for example at a "risk-appetite hackathon" with Canadian and international CSO partners and their local CSO partners to explore ways of assessing and managing risk more conducive to locally led development (OECD, 2024[30]). Smaller-scale, more focused efforts are also seen such as by Czechia, which through its Urgent Assistance to Ukraine mechanism has streamlined requirements and procedures to fast track support for Czech CSOs partnering with Ukrainian and Moldovan CSOs, while also providing direct support to local civil society actors in those countries through streamlined procedures (OECD, 2023[28]).

Some CSOs have also sought to address the burden of administrative and financial requirements imposed on local CSOs. For example, European members of the ACT Alliance CSO network developed a framework of minimum common acceptable requirements, standards and formats for proposals, reporting, and contracts that they would use with their local CSO partners. By having common, simplified requirements and procedures, their aim was to reduce the administrative burden on local CSOs, and to avoid that the most demanding provider requirements become their minimum requirement. In the midst of this endeavor, ACT Alliance issued a statement to their main providers noting that the detailed, specific and strict requirements of these providers was ACT Alliance's main obstacle to advancing with this CSO initiative, and called on providers to harmonise provider administrative and financial requirements (ACT Alliance, 2019[69]).

To date, the primary method providers use to harmonise requirements is through multi-donor pooled funds in partner countries. Through such funds, providers not only harmonize administrative and financial requirements but also share risks that they associate with directly funding local CSOs (OECD, 2023[28]). Country-based Pooled Funds, coordinated by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, are one such example of provider

harmonisation that has increased funding access by local CSOs and other actors (Baguios et al., 2021[70]). In 2013, a multi-donor effort led not to a pooled fund but to a Code of Practice on Harmonisation, the aim of which was for participating donors to harmonise due diligence requirements in their partnerships with international CSOs (Sida, 2019[61]; (n.a.), 2013[67]). Eleven years later, following minimal provider uptake of the Code, it is being reinvigorated by the DAC Community of Practice on Civil Society, given its potential to enable greater local CSO access to provider funds. DAC members of the CoP are aware of local CSOs' experience that flexibility of funding and streamlined administrative and financial requirements are not necessarily passed down to them by international CSOs (OECD, 2024[30]). Thus, they are proceeding with assurances "that the gains trickle down through the aid chain to the development actors and change agents in the South" ((n.a.), 2013, p. 5[67]).

CSO signatories of the Charter for Change have developed a "due diligence passporting tool" for use with their local CSO partners. The passporting is a form of certification that can ease the administrative burden experienced by local CSOs seeking funding from multiple international CSOs or directly from providers (Humentum, n.d.[71]; Humentum, 2023[72]). Responding to humanitarian needs brought on by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the UK fundraising network, the Disasters Emergency Committee, has used passporting such that its direct funding recipients can partner with Ukrainian CSOs without an added layer of due diligence from the Committee (Aly, 2022[73]). The Network for Empowered Aid Response, a movement of local CSOs, has with Hilton Foundation funding established the Change Fund that disburses funds exclusively to local CSOs across the globe using streamlined processes for rapid approval and disbursement (Network for Empowered Aid Response, n.d.[74]).

Tensions and implications

What are the tensions that arise for international and local CSOs from these policy and practice changes, however incremental they may be? What are the implications that may require CSOs and providers to continuously reflect and re-tool their approaches?

Budgets: For international CSOs, their budgets are likely to shrink over time as more of providers' CSO funds flow directly to partner country CSOs and as international CSOs channel larger share of the funds they receive to partner country CSOs. As international CSOs become less hands-on in traditional delivery roles, their ability to fund raise from private sources at home may also diminish. Realisation of this needs to be reflected in international CSOs' long-term strategic planning. Some may want to consider if they are ready to look toward 'stopping as

success', or, if not stopping, embracing a zero or even a de-growth strategy. While some may be tempted to "localize" themselves which puts them in even closer competition for limited funding available in partner countries (Younis, 2018[75])].

On the other hand, local CSOs' budgets may grow over time. There is no inherent reason that ever-more local CSOs receiving ever-more funds would lack the necessary financial management capacity to deal with growing budgets. Having such capacity is going to be critical to maintaining the momentum toward locally led development with CSOs. Experience has shown how one CSO's case of scandal or mismanagement has negative "reputational spillovers" to the whole CSO sector (Scurlock, 2020[76]). Local CSO's can continue to collaborate, directly with providers, with international CSOs or others as appropriate, to invest in their financial management capabilities. Alternatively, they might consider outsourcing financial management and other 'back office' functions to a shared services provider that caters to the CSO sector.

Roles: Peace Direct has developed a framework of nine roles for international CSOs that go beyond that of financial intermediary between providers and local CSOs. These roles are: interpreter, knowledge broker and producer; trainer, coach and co-learner; convenor; connector and eco-system builder; advocate and amplifier; watchdog; critical friend; and sidekick (Peace Direct, 2023[77]). Notably absent from this list are 'implementer' or even 'capacity builder'. An international CSO needs to reflect on which of these roles they can fill based on their experience and expertise, and to do so jointly with local CSO partners to be well-informed by the latter's perceptions, strengths, and needs. As Van Wessel, Naz and Sahoo's inquiry of Indian CSOs' perspective on complementarities in CSO collaborations suggests, this will require international CSOs to ask new questions about their relative strengths and do so from a starting point of mutual respect (2020[78]). International CSOs will need to ask themselves "What is this organisation's value-added with strong CSOs in the global south, within a framework of mutual respect, solidarity and common purpose?" (Kuloba-Warria and Tomlinson, 2023[56]).

A number of Peace Direct's nine roles for international CSOs may equally need to be taken on by local CSOs – interpreter, knowledge broker, co-learner for example, are all roles through which local CSOs may need to help international CSOs to transform through systemic change versus through "projectisation" of localisation (Baguios et al., 2021[68]). And as local CSOs take on a more prominent leadership role in the aid system, it will be important to be aware of the risk of falling further into the mode of being implementers of providers' initiatives (Bebbington, 1997[79]; Hulme, 1996[80]), of "becoming copies of the very system that has been identified as colonial, top-down, and burdensome" (Kuloba-Warria and Tomlinson, 2023, p. 23[56]). Local

CSOs need also to continuously self-reflective about what their value-added is in relation to the communities and constituencies they work with, and to continuously strengthen their accountability relationships with communities and constituents in partner countries.

Capacity strengthening: International CSOs used to the traditional model of supply-driven capacity development may be too slow or unable to adjust their self-perception as the providers of capacity strengthening and the methods that go with it. They will need to engage in self-reflection on their real and relative value-added, explore innovative models and approaches that are not formulaic, and start from a place of appreciation of partner country CSOs' strengths rather than a deficit model. International CSOs need to identify and learn from models of co-learning or mutual capacity strengthening, including from outside of the CSO sector such as learning from models of South-South and Triangular co-operation (OECD, 2024[41]). They may find that the combination of new roles envisaged and different approaches to capacity strengthening require different staff skills and expertise, to be better listeners and better understand local contexts.

It may also take time for some local CSOs to adjust their self-perception given the decades of being on the receiving end of capacity strengthening offerings, rather than being active co-creators of and participants in their organisational evolution. All in all, the transition will take time and resources. A study on the benefits and costs of transitioning ODA flows away from international to local intermediaries outlines an eight-year "Transition Fund" to support capacity, structure and ecosystem development needed to enable a shift of 25% of ODA to local CSO intermediaries (Cabot Venton, 2022[27]).

Within-sector power: International CSOs may feel threatened by the changing development cooperation landscape and their role in it, but those that are slow to adapt to today's realities may find themselves increasingly irrelevant (Månsson, 2015[81]). Within the international CSO sector, it will be those that are best resourced with the capacity to think and plan ahead and strategically, as some are doing, that will be able to survive, not just for the sake of it, but to add value as principled partners. An international CSO becoming "local" is not a solution, given the potential to crowd out local CSOs when it comes to access to funding, programming and advocacy space. International CSOs will need to have the courage to change, and to exit from some or all of their traditional roles, becoming service providers to local CSOs on a demand-driven basis.

For local CSOs, in both the cases of indirect support via international CSOs or direct support, the 'usual suspects' in partner countries are likely to be favoured, which risks reinforcing existing power imbalances in partner countries' CSO sectors. This will apply the more there is harmonisation such as with well-intentioned tools like charity passporting as and if there is uptake

by many providers or international CSOs. Informal or more nascent civil society actors, or those that do not already have experience within the international development co-operation system may continue to be excluded. A 2021 survey of CSOs in Latin America found that over half of respondents knew of a CSO that was excluded from the formal banking system for example, due to the perception that they are at high-risk for money laundering (International Center for Not-for-profit Law, 2022[82]).

Public, parliament, and government perceptions: In provider countries, publics, parliaments, and governments may be slow to embrace the changes or even averse to them. They have grown used to and indeed want to see their own country representatives as the trusted face of their country's development co-operation. International CSOs are seen to bring expertise, efficiency and results more quickly than partner country CSOs, and as being better placed to safe-guard both public, tax-funded ODA and private contributions (OECD, 2020[38]). Authentic global education that dispels patronising myths about partner country capacities is needed along with more investment in building public trust in international CSOs. As an example, the UK international development CSO umbrella, BOND, produced ethical guidelines that urge CSOs to put partners and local communities at the centre of image-making, to recognise their rights, and to consider CSOs' responsibilities in gathering and using their images and words for communications purposes (Bond, 2019[83]). The dispelling of myths and modernising of global education needs to be done genuinely and unapologetically, while bearing in mind the potential for backlash such as experienced by OXFAM UK in response to their Inclusive Language Guide (Downes, 21 March 2023[84]).

In partner countries, the growing mistrust of provider countries of the Global North and their ODA may be extended to local CSOs that are seen to be receiving a larger piece of the pie, or as having a 'foreign' agenda. The type of regulations on foreign funding for CSOs seen in countries ranging from Bangladesh to Georgia more recently (International Center for Not-for-profit Law, 2024[85]) could become even more frequent and restrictive. A move towards more locally led development will require more effort from providers and CSOs alike to protect civic space in partner countries (International Center for Not-for-profit Law, 2022[82]). Again, local grounded-ness and more investment in communication and accountability in partner countries is going to be needed.

Conclusion

Steps are being taken in the international development cooperation community toward more locally led development, but it is too soon to tell if the changes will be widespread and deep enough to fulfil the old mantra that international CSOs' work in development co-operation is about putting themselves out of a job.

Providers, international and local CSOs all need to proceed with ambition, but with eyes need to be wide open to the tensions and potential for unintended consequences on CSOs, in partner countries but also international CSOs. Locally led development has considerable momentum at the present moment, and care is needed or the pendulum will swing back to the long-standing ways of doing the business of development cooperation through international CSOs with local CSOs in second place as their implementing arms. Peer learning and cross-fertilisation from the pockets of policy and practice can help to make locally led development endure.

There is scope for ample more evidence on this subject. First, beyond the anecdotal evidence such as is presented in this working paper, a systematic tracking of providers' and CSOs' actions toward more locally led development would be needed to assess the degree to which policy and practice match the rhetoric. In its peer learning synthesis, the OECD proposes existing tracking tools, such as its own ODA data on Country Programmable Aid, while proposing indicators that providers could use to track their progress in putting enablers of locally led development in place (OECD, 2024[30]). Beyond this kind of evidence of progress in implementing locally led development approaches however, further evidence is needed to show that locally led development is not just intuitively the right thing to do but is effective and efficient in achieving development results.

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Notes

[1] Under this funding mechanism Sida in early 2024 had framework agreements with 17 Swedish CSOs. The number of agreements has varied slightly over the years.