CIVIL SOCIETY AT MERCY CORPS

Discussion Paper

Introduction

This discussion paper represents an effort by the Mercy Corps Governance and Partnership Technical Support Unit to consolidate its understanding of current trends and knowledge related to partnering with local civil society actors and consider their implications for practice. The document is further intended to aid in discussions at similar institutions with an interest in a strong civil society worldwide. The objective at the heart of the paper, and of Mercy Corps' approach to partnering with civil society, is local civil society's ownership of the development and aid initiatives they implement.

Partnerships are critical to addressing the world's toughest challenges. The issues are too complex to go it alone. Every day, in almost every part of the world, Mercy Corps engages in partnerships—with civil society organizations, for-profit entities, donors, governments and other aid organizations. Local partnerships form the foundation of our programs, and provide access, legitimacy, local knowledge and unparalleled perspectives. But we do not partner for operational exigency alone. We recognize that for good governance to take root, it must grow from within. Only through effective partnerships—which support local ownership— can we hope to sustainably impact the complex systems and contexts where we work.

At the same time, in many regions we are engaging with local organizations of substantial inherent capacity that are seeking collaborative partnerships in support of their own objectives. Moreover Mercy Corps acknowledges the colonial history of international development has created deeply inequitable power dynamics in the present.[1] We, as an international organization, hold a disproportionate amount of power when it comes to local partnerships because of the resources we access and manage. Understanding how that power could be exercised differently is a critical component to redistributing it. This paper offers entry points for reflection, within Mercy Corps and elsewhere, on steps international actors can take to continue to live up to the standards we set for ourselves in partnering with civil society. It is part of our commitment to listening, learning, and taking action to address inequities in the international development system.

Background

A strong governance system requires a robust, independent civil society. Civil society is a space for collective engagement and action on issues of public and private importance that can take many forms. It comprises a multi-faceted spectrum of actors and entities, from informal actors like water-user associations, youth groups and women's councils, to community-based organizations or more formalized, registered organizations. As part of its partnership approach, Mercy Corps believes in supporting civil society to fulfill its role in sharing information and promoting transparency, its organizational and technical capacities to elevate citizen's concerns through advocacy and its ability to builds strong networks. We seek to enhance the capacity, networks and inclusivity of local organizations to support a skilled and connected civil society.

A strong, independent, endogenous civil society plays many important roles. In places where governance is weak or conflict prevents the reach of essential services, civil society fills essential gaps in terms of service

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delivery, often for the most marginalized communities. In places that are more open, civil society has a key role to play in mobilizing citizens to voice their demands, represent their demands and hold governance institutions accountable to community priorities. While recent global trends have seen growing constraints on civil society, the political polarization or authoritarian tendencies seen in national level discourse do not always translate to closing space for civic voice and activism at the local level. Civil society also directly engages with governments and the private sector to ensure effective service delivery, security and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms. The resilience of fragile states is tied directly to the strength and influence of its civil society.[2]

Only through effective and equitable partnerships can we as international actors hope to impact the complex systems in the difficult contexts where we work; in complex or protracted humanitarian crises, partnerships with local civil society groups can be our only means of reaching communities that are most in need.[3] As it relates to humanitarian crises in particular, local actors are generally the first responders and are also the best equipped in terms of local knowledge and language to respond to community needs. Partnerships with national and local organizations enhance the relevance, appropriateness and connectedness of responses, and this lays the foundation to better connect communities to relief and development efforts.[4] Good governance and resilience to such crises cannot be programmed into existence by external organizations. To take root, it must grow from within. The question for international organizations is how to support this.

Existing Efforts

Civil society organizations have increased in number, capacity and coordination over the last thirty years, increasingly participating in global policy-setting and defining their own standards of practice.[5] The humanitarian sector's localization agenda over the past decade and a half has continued to push the aid and development sectors, with some success, to ensure local actors have meaningful control over resources entering their countries.[6] This has included attention to the role of non-financial resources, strategy, and transition planning in forming partnerships.[7] It includes efforts like the Start Network's Shifting the Power consortium (ActionAid, Oxfam, Concern Worldwide, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Tearfund), the Charter for Change (funded by UKAID, got commitments of 29 INGOs and was endorsed by hundreds of local organizations to increase direct funding to southern-based NGOs), the Grand Bargain (signatories include 25 country governments, 11 UN Agencies, 5 inter-governmental organizations and Red Cross/Red Crescent Movements and 22 NGOs)[8], the European Union's country roadmaps for more equitable and strategic engagement with civil society,[9] the Shift the Power Lab run by the Power of Voices Program of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and efforts of 14 US-based corporate and private foundations, donor advised funds, and crowdfunding platforms to enact localization principles in their humanitarian work.[10] The Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR), comprised of more than 170 member organizations from the Global South and advocating "nothing about us with us," formed following the Grand Bargain.[11]

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[2] OECD "2018 States of Fragility Report" https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/9789264302075-5-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/9789264302075-5-en

[3] Howe, Kim, Nathan Ives, Alex Porter, Ryan Sheely. (2019). Investing in Syrian Humanitarian Action: Performance Evaluation Report. Washington, DC: Mercy Corps. It is important to understand what we are referring to when we talk about partnership. For our purposes this term excludes purely transactional relationships (e.g., via a service contract).

[4] Action Aid, Shifting the Power Project: http://www.actionaid.org/jobs/shifting-power-project-learning-review-12-how-has-shifting-power-project-influenced-local-and-n

[5] See e.g.: CSO Open Forum and the Istanbul Principles for CSO Effectiveness https://ngoperformance.org/2011/08/18/the-istanbul-principles-for-cso-effectiveness/

[6] Namely by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s High Level Fora on Aid Effectiveness in Paris (2005), Accra (2008), and Busan (2011).

[7] "The Drive Toward Localization." August 2016. http://keystoneaccountability.org/2016/08/08/the-drive-towards-localization/

[8] "About the Grand Bargain." Inter-Agency Standing Committee, UN. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/about-the-grand-bargain

[9] European Union, Country Roadmaps for Civil Society Engagement. https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/file/25815/download?token=GxJdyykC

[10] "Strengthening Local Humanitarian Leadership Philanthropic Toolkit." Disaster Philanthropy Playbook. https://disasterplaybook.org/collaboration/strengthening-local-humanitarian-leadership-philanthropic-toolkit/

[11] http://near.ngo/

Related notable trends bridging development and aid include a focus on local and community philanthropy among donors, foundations, and more importantly among local organizations that seek to build the power of and accountability to local constituencies.[12] A movement to "#ShiftThePower" (not associated with the Shift the Power Consortium mentioned above) has been taken up by various institutions promoting these approaches since a 2016 Global Summit on Community Philanthropy, including through a Pathways to Power Symposium in late 2019.[13] USAID's Forward initiative from 2010-2016, and current Journey to Self-Reliance policies, Local Works programs, and New Partnerships Initiatives also represent efforts by a large bilateral donor to think and behave differently about local partnerships. Notably, USAID has announced its forthcoming Policy on Local Capacity Development (to be released November 2020) as a principles-based policy that invests in the local system, leverages existing assets, and "nurtures partnerships based on respect and mutual accountability."[14] There are similar reckonings taking place within domestic philanthropy about its ways of engaging with civil society, though the discussions rarely merge.[15] Efforts like the above and reflections on Mercy Corps' own experience suggest a number of principles and practices for international institutions to consider in forming equitable partnerships with local civil society.

Getting Local Partnership Right: Who & What

Build long-term strategic partnerships. International organizations often identify local partners with a largely pre-designed activity in mind and formally engage for one project cycle. Five years is the duration of agreement a direct USAID partner can typically expect. By the time start-up, forming sub-agreements, and close out are taken into account, sub-partners have a considerably shorter timeline. Unpredictable or delayed start dates of awards can cause struggles for local partners including in retaining staff.[16] Relationships that last beyond the life of a project, and better yet, exist independent of particular project cycles, will yield more effective, contextualized program interventions and stronger, more mutual relationships. A recent evaluation of a Mercy Corps program supporting the capacity of Syrian CSOs showed the vital importance of trust and mutual respect between the international and local CSO staff in humanitarian outcomes from the program.[17]

This shift from a project-based partnership to a strategic partnership orientation can take many forms, including funding for transition periods to shore up sustainability of organizations beyond the life of the partnership. Another is determining partnership goals over time through consultation, and phasing the engagement as it evolves and deepens based on the cooperative efforts. This ongoing engagement and mutual accountability around vision and goals can breed more thoughtful and responsive civil society support initiatives, as well as authentic and capable civic groups that have engaged in protracted self-reflection and agenda setting. It is important to establish regular feedback loops and health checks for partnerships, in which the international entities regularly seek and act on meaningful feedback.

Support organizations and movements, not activities. In addition to being short-term, funding to local civil society organizations is usually restricted to project outputs. Besides overlooking the slow pace, iterative nature and potential for backlash inherent in social change work, this ignores the realities of operating an organization particularly one that seeks to be responsive to emerging conditions. Even for straightforward service delivery agreements, restricted project funding that does not cover the real costs associated with an organization's participation in a program can harm the organization's sustainability and detract from their

[12] See e.g. ; the Global Fund for Community Foundations, https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/scs_localphilanthropyannexv7_1.pdf
[13] Pathways to Power Symposium, Conference Report, 26 November 2019. https://www.alliancemagazine.org/conf-report/pathways-to-power-symposium-new-ways-of-deciding-and-doing/
[14] USAID Webinar: Introducing USAID's Forthcoming Local Capacity Development Policy: A Conversation with the Development Community. October 7, 2020.
[15] See e.g Villanueva, 2018, Decolonizing Wealth; https://www.peakgrantmaking.org/resource/strategies-for-driving-equity-in-grantmaking/; https://racialequity.org/grantmaking-with-a-racial-justice-lens/ ; https://ssir.org/articles/entry/transformational_capacity_building
[16] Howe, Mercy Corps. Ibid.
[17] Ibid.

core mission.[18] For instance, a Mercy Corps study illustrated that Syrian humanitarian response organizations saw core funds as essential to operating in a conflict zone, but most lacked them.[19] Mercy Corps successfully advocated to its donor to secure core funding for office operating costs for an umbrella network NGO in Liberia, to enable it to continue its work to shore up its membership and advance a more vibrant and connected civic sector in Liberia.

A NEAR Network 2018 Strategy Paper called for international donors to shift to an "investment" mindset when working with local civil society partners.[20] Ideally donors would provide core funding which partners could use to cover the operational and human resources necessary to function, for activities responsive to needs and opportunities that arise, and as leverage to access other outside resources as necessary. The importance of unrestricted funding for organizations is well understood, though donors rarely find ways to provide it. In many cases, they will only cover direct costs associated with the specific activities for which they have identified a partner. Yet while the required "overhead" costs to carry out activities can vary widely, anywhere from 20-80% of direct costs depending on organization type and context, non-US organizations on USAID grants are typically discouraged from charging any indirect fees despite the existence of a 10% de minimis indirect rate USAID regulations should permit.[21] For comparison, INGOs take in an estimated 10-20% of total agreement budgets to cover their indirect costs as prime USAID partners.[22]

Develop ways to support social movements. A critical component of civil society are collective expressions of civic action like social movements, which play an essential role in societal discourse, successfully challenging corruption and authoritarian rule. Decentralized, loosely structured groups without significant access to funding are often on the leading edge of representing the perspectives of oppressed and marginalized groups. They are also under high levels of threat. External actors need to consider how we can best support these diffuse, sometimes leaderless – but still often highly focused – efforts. Despite tensions about vision and tactics between leaderless movements and more established civil society organizations, movements still may depend on the administrative, technical, and legal structures of established organizations for sustained action.[23] As movements occupy an increasingly central role in civic action, it is incumbent on international actors to identify ways that we can support them.[24]

This will require listening and learning to understand how movements are structured and the various entry points where support may further the cause, what forms of support are most appropriate, and how best to channel it. It also calls for long-term commitments, given the slow but unpredictable pace at which social change occurs; victories that seem exceedingly small are critical for building towards bigger impact when the time is right. Rapid response funds may be a useful tactic, so that activists can access small but critical funding to take advantage of tipping points or political openings. Engagement will require close attention to physical risks and security of the activists involved.[25] In many cases, it will require identifying ways to supported unregistered organizations, potentially working with formal organizations in the background of the movements to do so or with locally-appropriate fiscal sponsors.

[18] See e.g. Eckhart-Queenan, Jeri, Michael Etzel, and Sridhar Prasad. **"Pay-What-It-Takes Philanthropy."** May 15, 2016. https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/pay-what-it-takes/pay-what-it-takes-philanthropy

[19] Howe, Mercy Corps. Ibid.

[20] "Giving People Voice and Ownership: NEAR Strategic Plan, 2018 – 2020." http://www.near.ngo/imgtemp/downloadfile/NEAR%20Strategy%202018-2020_published%20paper_1519803585.pdf

[21] Eckhart-Queenan, Ibid. AND USAID, "When can an organization use the 10% de minimis rate for indirect costs?" https://www.usaid.gov/india/partner-resources/infographic-de-minimis-rate-indirect-costs

[22] Honermann, Brian et al. "Calculating indirect costs from international PEPFAR implementing partners." *PloS one* vol. 13,10 e0206425. 29 Oct. 2018. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6205636/

[23] Glasius, Marlies and Ishkanian, Armine (2014) Surreptitious symbiosis: engagement between activists and NGO's. VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/60128/1/Glasius_Ishkanian_Surreptitious-symbiosis_2014.pdf

[24] Sriskandarajah, Dhananjayan. "How NGOs and social movements can learn to work together better." December 2017. https://www.open democracy.net/democraciaabierta/CIVICUS/dhananjayan-sriskandarajah/how-ngos-and-social-movements-can-learn-to-work-togethe

[25] "Understanding Activism: How international ngos, and foundations can provide better support to social movements." Rhize, July 2017. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54c7f971e4b0d312f4d794ef/t/59655b4446c3c406d8e91f32/1499814725501/Understanding+Activism+July+2017.pdf

Getting Local Partnership Right: Where & When

Be aware and sensitive to closing civic space as it impacts on the partnership process. Notably in terms of context, the closing of civic space – freedom of association, freedom of assembly, and freedom of expression--has become the norm rather than the exception globally, even in countries with democratically elected governments.[26] Over sixty governments around the world have put restrictive legislation in place to limit and control national civil society organizations (related to how it can organize, how it is funded and how it uses its money, what it can act on) and civil society members are increasingly subject to verbal and physical attacks and disappearances and assassinations and criminalization based on biased judicial proceedings.[27] Mercy Corps' experience suggests a minimum level of security is required for citizen and civil society organizations to safely engage in participatory, inclusive and accountable decision making. As long as this is achievable, the appropriate donor responses to this phenomenon, articulated in a 2018 report from the International Center for Not-For-Profit Law (ICNL), are similar to the broader recommendations regarding local ownership of development summarized in this discussion paper. In particular this includes allowing civil society to take the lead and strengthen networks, supporting informal movements, and providing flexible and core funding.[28]

Partner in ways that account for the complex environments of which civil society is a part. Research shows that few international actors take the time to really understand the social, political, cultural and historical contexts in which civil society operates before brokering partnerships.[29] They focus instead on a linear approach to a technical problem, selecting partners prepared to deliver a set of services or activities according to the solution donors have identified. Identifying solutions that resonate locally – and often even accurately identifying the problem or set of conditions that created and maintain it – means understanding how different stakeholders interact with each other and the role of contextual factors (also called the enabling environment).

At a partnerships level, this means understanding not only individual organizations but how they fit and interact with each other and other stakeholders. Even for service delivery arrangements, the "enabling environment" for organizations on the ground and how they are received by communities directly impacts their reach and impact. Tools like systems analysis, network and governance mapping, and political economy analysis should be part of "capacity" assessments, with civil society itself taking a lead in assessments and the planning and strategizing that results. These tools can be especially useful in those environments of closing civic space, where they can inform local groups' political calculations related to selecting certain issues to target or strategies of tactics to employ.

Getting Local Partnership Right: How

Expect less control and more work up front to clarify mutual needs and expectations. International partnerships are traditionally structured to maximize the control that donors, and their intermediaries like INGOs, have over how local partners use support they receive. Accountability is "upward," as it is often termed, to the taxpayers of the donor country (or the founders/trustees in the case of foundations), rather than "downward" to the communities and individuals the resources are intended to serve. The ways in which international organizations decide on funding priorities and identify partners, compliance regulations, budget and work plans approvals, and reporting and monitoring systems by definition set limits on local partners'

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[26] Partners Global "Organizational Resiliency in Closing Civic Space" https://www.partnersglobal.org/resource/resiliency-framework/ ; https://www.partnersglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/COMPLETE-R-Framework-10.2.19.pdf ; http://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2016/summaries/State-of-Civil-Society-Report-2016_Exec-Summary.pdf
[27] CIVICUS 2016 Civil Society Report http://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2016/summaries/State-of-Civil-Society-Report-2016_Exec-Summary.pdf
[28] "Effective Donor Responses to the Challenge of Closing Civic Space." ICNL, May 2018. https://mk0rofifiqa2w3u89nud.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/Effective-donor-responses-FINAL-1-May-2018.pdf?_ga=2.258677322.1719969087.1601559633-374658378.1601559633
[29] P 38 2014 Capable Partners Learning Agenda on Local Organization Capacity Development https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/LA-Complete-Final-Report-to-USAID_2.20.14.pdf

power to make independent decisions about use of the resources they are managing. Assumptions underlying the arrangements are that local organizations cannot be trusted to spend funds in ways that further the goals of the donors without careful controls. This contrasts with how international funding operates in the case of social entrepreneurship ventures and government actors, where there is more tolerance for risk and failure.

It can be incredibly difficult to balance responsiveness to donor requirements and local needs.[30] Access to meaningful financial resources in many cases requires tapping into international sources. Organizations most successful at doing so often orient priorities, plans, and internal systems to donor priorities and needs rather than the aspirations of their local constituents. The administrative burdens, inflexibility and lack of responsiveness associated with donor funding serves to deter potential civil society partners that have existing deep "downward" accountability to local constituencies. Because of their community reach and trust, such organizations have potential to be very effective in supporting a donors' broad priorities -- if they are given leeway to work according to their own models and judgments of the context.

In effective partnerships, public, private and/or non-profit institutions share incentives, commit resources and agree to work cooperatively and collectively toward common development goals. These relationships enable systems-level, transformative capacity to expand and evolve. At its most effective and sustainable, the process of partnering is one of co-creation and working together towards collective, long term change. This means collaborating to set strategic direction, reflect on approaches, acknowledge and learn from mistakes, and adapt to new circumstances. It also means acknowledging and allowing for complexity. It may mean thinking broadly in terms of resources; it may be that funding is not a donors only or most valuable resource to a local organization, but rather social connections, administrative capacity, or technical expertise in a niche area.[31]

Reduce administrative burdens on local organizations. Due to the donor controls discussed above, accepting international funds often comes with intensive administrative requirements. When an organization manages grants from different donors – funding diversification that donors encourage in theory -- it can require administrative and financial personnel with specialized experience in each donor's systems and regulations, rather than allowing for economies of scale. While INGOs also have social capital and technical capacities to offer, one appropriate role to assist in donors' equitable support for local organizations is supporting in compliance and management in a way that prevents a heavy grants management burden to distract from their core work. Another way to reduce the burden on local partners is to accept certifications by local peak body organization or vetting results and other pre-award administration used by other donors/INGOs, rather than require redundant reviews.

Support partners to engage with local philanthropy, especially community philanthropy. Local resources may not be sufficient to replace international funding, even when accounting for non-financial resources. Regardless, the orientation towards local constituencies and local traditions of giving, the potential access to unrestricted funds, and the building of trust and collective power themselves directly contribute to strengthening civil society and decreasing donor dependence.[32] Potential approaches for international organizations laid out in a USAID brief include directly supporting community savings and loans groups, foundations, and funds that take an empowerment approach, supporting local philanthropy support organizations and networks, encouraging partners to use grant funding for matching funds and "challenge grants" in the context of community engagement campaigns, as well as work on the social and legal context for philanthropy.[33]

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[30] Facilitating Financial Sustainability: Understanding the Drivers of CSO Financial Sustainability. May 2018 https://www.issuelab.org/resources/30588/30588.pdf
[31] See e.g. Howe, Mercy Corps, 2019
[32] Hodgson, Jenny and Anna Pond. "How Community Philanthropy Shifts Power." GrantCraft, 2018. https://grantcraft.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/12/Community_Philanthropy_paper.pdf ; Houghton, Irũngũ, "Five disempowering traits that international NGOs must drop." October 2016. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/five-disempowering-traits-that-international-ngos-must-drop/
[33] "Local Philanthropy and Self Reliance." https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/scs_localphilanthropyannexv7_1.pdf

Approach capacity development so that it is systems oriented, reflects adult learning good practices, and is controlled by partners. International institutions that partner with local civil society often support some form of capacity development for local civil society. Local partners tend to value the opportunity particularly when it is tailored to their needs and preferences.[34] These approaches typically focus on internal procedures and structures like board governance rules, administrative systems, human resource practices, M&E, and strategic plans. Though these approaches can be valuable and important for an organization's work, USAID found that approaches that assess and engage systems and support organizations to perform and sustain themselves in evolving environments have more impact on furthering program-level impact than ones focused on the level of an individual organization.[35] Analysis approaches include stakeholder mapping, policy analysis, network analysis, political economy analysis, and organizational resilience analysis.

Local civil society development institutions should be considered first when identifying providers for capacity development support. Capacity development practices that correspond to a systems approach include the use of action learning, coaching, peer learning groups and other adult learning methodologies. In addition to themselves building relationships and networks, such methods are more likely in their own right to lead to increased skills and abilities of participants compared to off the shelf training modules.[36] Trainings are appropriate in some cases, but particularly without immediate application to practice can mean wasted time and resources.

Partner ownership over the capacity development process is also required to have meaningful impact; the primary reason to start with organizational self-assessments, which are not externally valid measures of capacity, is to promote buy-in and ownership of the process.[37] Many assessment models assume that individual or cohorts of similar organizations will design their own assessment tools (based on broad suggestions of capacity areas) in order to ensure the assessment aligns with their features and contexts.[38]

Monitor and evaluate in ways appropriate to participatory, long-term work on systems. Rather than focus on short and medium term quantitative targets, consider methodologies appropriate for adaptive management and for evaluation of community organizing and advocacy efforts. In movement building, even efforts that may not achieve their end goal can result in building "power, capacity, sophistication and collaboration" that contributes to longer-term impact.[39] Current thinking emphasizes that self-assessment results not be used to measure impact of capacity development, rather performance of the organizations and systems, for which USAID has endorsed a set of standardized tools.[40] Understanding the quality of relationships among actors in a system as well as capturing constituent voice (i.e., feedback on an organization and the communities it claims to represent) are other important factors to consider in measuring change. Furthermore, monitoring and evaluation approaches should work within or complement partners' preferences and existing systems.

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[34] See e.g International Rescue Committee. "Organizational Development of Local Civil Society Partners." January 2016. https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/566/organizationaldevelopmentdiscussionpaper-vofinal29012016.pdf

[35] Strengthening Civil Society Globally (SCS Global) USAID. "Capacity Development Interventions: A Guide for Program Designers. " https://www.ngoconnect.net/sites/default/files/2018-12/SCS%20Global_Capacity%20Development%20Interventions%20Guide_FINAL.pdf

[36] "6 Principles for Adult Learning." Global Learning Partners. https://www.globallearningpartners.com/wp-content/uploads/migrated/resources/6_Core_Principles_for_Learning.pdf

[37] See e.g. Jacobstein, D. (2015). Organizational Capacity Development Measurement. USAID Bureau for Democracy Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance. https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/capacity_development_measurement_recommendations_final_draft_5.11.2017.pdf

[38] See e.g. "Bringing the invisible into perspective: Reference document for using the 5Cs framework to plan, monitor and evaluate capacity and results of capacity development processes." ECDPM, 2011. https://ecdpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2011-5Cs-Framework-Plan-Evaluate-Monitor-Capacity-Development-Processes.pdf,

[39] National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy. Movements 1010. http://bjn9t2lhlni2dhd5hvym7llj-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/HNWD-donor-movements-brief.pdf ; see ncrp.org/movements

[40] SCS Global. Ibid. https://www.ngoconnect.net/sites/default/files/2018-12/SCS%20Global_Capacity%20Development%20Interventions%20Guide_FINAL.pdf

Develop a research agenda to deepen evidence-based understanding of civil society strengthening:
The field could benefit greatly from a clearly defined research agenda, particularly if it is coordinated across agencies and donors. A few areas for further exploration are:

- the link between the essential role a vibrant civil society plays in a good governance system (which might be an end in itself for some) and how it can contribute to conflict prevention, mitigation and long term resilience and stability.
- the link between how investing in civil society organizations strengthens the scale and reach, effectiveness, speed, responsiveness, and best use of resources for INGOs and donors.
- how local partners benefit from capacity building, and how international organizations are learning and benefiting from these partnerships.

Conclusion

This discussion paper attempted to summarize some of the key approaches, for Mercy Corps and others, to consider in partnering with local civil society. Its central consideration was local ownership of development and aid initiatives, in conjunction with the realities of international development financial flows and power relationships. This paper proposes a model in which partnerships are long-term and strategic, based on an equitable relationship in which donor and implementer work together toward common goals.

A more robust democratic system of civic engagement and civil society activism and advocacy will support more vibrant development outcomes that more responsively meet societal needs. Closing political space, and increased or protracted conflict, contribute to fewer opportunities for civil society activism. International actors should seek venues or vehicles that protect, sustain, enable, and amplify local civic voices. How those partnerships work in practice however, is central to local ownership of sustainable development goals.

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About Mercy Corps
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powered by the belief that a better world is possible.
In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries
around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into
action — helping people triumph over adversity and
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