

Briefing paper:

Comments and recommendations for the EC Communication on Civil Society Organisations in Development Cooperation based on key lessons from Danish civil society support

1. Scope of the paper

This paper is intended as an input to the *EC Communication on Civil Society Organisations in Development Cooperation* and will provide an overview of core lessons learnt from Danish experiences with civil society support. The paper is based on more than 10 years of experience with the implementation of the official Danish strategies for support to civil society.

The fundamental thinking of the Danish strategies reflects, in many respects, the current aid effectiveness agenda. This paper will therefore highlight some of the concrete ways the Aid Effectiveness Agenda can contribute to a more progressive and sustainable EU development agenda. The Danish experiences provide concrete examples of the implementation of the Aid Effectiveness agenda and in particular the *Istanbul CSO Development Effectiveness Principles* and the *Siem Reap Consensus on the International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness*.

2. Background of Official Danish support to Civil Society

Civil society support has been acknowledged in the Danida strategies as an important and integrated part of Danish development assistance for more than a decade. All Danida funded support to civil society irrespective of channel and modality is guided by the *Strategy for Danish support to Civil Society in Developing Countries* from 2008. The current strategy is a revised and updated version of the strategy for civil society support from 2000, but the overall principles have not been changed.

The strategy covers civil society support through multilateral, bilateral and direct funding through NGOs, as well as direct support to civil society organisations in developing countries via Danish Embassies or joint donor funding. The support to southern civil society organisations through Danish and international NGOs are guided by the overall principles of the Danish strategy for development assistance, *The Right to a Better Life* from 2012. However Danish- and international NGO interventions are not bound by Danish country strategies, nor is the scope of their operations restricted to Danish priority countries. The only restriction in terms of geography is that Danish funding can only be used for NGO projects implemented in DAC countries with a GNI pr. capita below USD 2.630 (2011, the figure is adjusted on an annual basis).

Support to civil society plays a considerable role in Danish development assistance, with the support channelled through CSOs amounting to roughly 2,7 billion Danish kroner annually, which is equivalent to 17% of all Danish aid or 23% of bilateral aid. The amount channelled through Danish NGOs constitutes the biggest single funding channel. It has in recent years remained at approximately 1 billion DKK or 11% of Danish bilateral development assistance¹.

3. Major Lessons relevant for *EC Communication on Civil Society Organisations in Development Cooperation*

Based on the Danish experiences from civil society support CONCORD Denmark finds that the draft *EC Communication on Civil Society Organisations in Development Cooperation*, in many respects, provides a sound basis for future EC support to civil society. The overall aim, scope and focus of intervention provided for in the paper are in most respects very similar or complementary to what has proven to be relevant in the Danish Civil Society Strategy. The rights based approach to development is in line with recent developments in the Danish approach and is supported by CONCORD Denmark as a sound basis.

A major concern of CONCORD Denmark is the *EC Communication's* lack of concrete reflections on which aid instruments and modalities are considered the most relevant to achieve the stated objectives. This is somewhat in contrast to the paper's reference to the Aid Effectiveness agenda which is mainly concerned with the importance of aid modalities and instruments.

Previous experiences with EU funding show that sound policies are often not supported by adequate funding modalities and implementation mechanisms. Funding modalities and the consideration of the roles of various stakeholders in both north-and south are not merely technical issues which can be added to the strategy. Unless concrete modalities supporting the overall aim of the strategy are in place it is unlikely that the aims will ever be fulfilled.

3.1 Decentralised, strategic and contextually relevant civil society

Central to the *EC Communication on Civil Society Organisations in Development Cooperation* is that it should be contextually relevant and strategic. This will be secured through the elaboration of regularly updated EU roadmaps for engagement with CSOs at country level. The *EC Communication* should be commended for highlighting the need for strategic, contextual and country specific strategies. The intentions of elaborating regularly updated roadmaps are sound and relevant but also very ambitious. The *EC Communication* is silent on how this goal would be practically achieved. The process for developing the roadmaps will be essential, as will the inclusion of all relevant civil society actors in this process. This will clarify whether it is a truly civil society owned process or a process driven by national governments. Furthermore, depending on the autonomy of the process, risks persist as to the degree to which the roadmaps will develop into mechanisms for co-optation of national civil society organisations or support their independence and further development.

¹ The figures are based on the: IOD PARC; Pre study for the evaluation of the Strategy for Danish support to Civil Society, Final Report March 2012, as no official Danida break down is available.

Additionally, CONCORD Denmark finds that the need for strategic approaches needs to be balanced against responsiveness to emerging situations and the potential for funding new, innovative and non-conventional initiatives. The pace of the “Arab Spring” is but one recent reminder of the need for flexibility and responsiveness if EU funding is to remain relevant. Flexibility could be built into national roadmaps by reserving a portion of the country programme for responsive funding and programming of new and emerging civil society initiatives. Based on the positive Danish experiences with allowing Danish NGOs to operate independently of country strategies, it is likely that such options will provide interesting new and nonconventional opportunities for engaging with new trends.

3.2 Support for development of an enabling environment for civil society

The EC Communication on Civil Society Organisations in Development Cooperation states as one of three priority areas that it wants: “To enhance efforts to promote a conducive environment in partner countries”. This is very similar to one of the main targets of the Danish strategy which aims at improving the *framework conditions for civil society in developing countries*.

The Danish strategy explicitly mentions that the Embassy discusses framework conditions with the authorities in countries of cooperation. The integration of relevant Ministry of Foreign Affairs instruments in the promotion of the principles of the Danish strategy for civil society support is an important aspect of the strategy. It underlines the commitment to, and need for, multiple entry points to secure the development of a vibrant and independent civil society. However, the experience from the Danish strategy is mixed. In some cases the strategic discussions on civil society space have not been given sufficient attention by Danish embassies. Furthermore it is acknowledged that the potential for Denmark to influence local policies and practices vis-à-vis civil society space is restricted by the size and political weight of Denmark and the limited number of main cooperating countries in which Denmark is present.

The importance of engaging in policy dialogue as outlined in *the EC Communication on Civil Society Organisations in Development Cooperation* is welcomed. It is commended that the EU roadmaps for stronger engagement with CSOs is not only seen as a way to support more strategic interventions but as an instrument for dialogue with host countries. The envisaged recurring update of the roadmaps could prove to be an important instrument for systematic monitoring and dialogue based on documented trends and developments.

3.3 Support for a vibrant independent civil society as the strategic focus of the Danish Strategy.

Fundamental to the Danish Civil Society Strategy is that; “The long-term overarching objective of Danish civil society support is to contribute to the development of a strong, independent and diversified civil society in developing countries”², the rationale is that “civil society actors contribute to promoting people’s right to organise, express views and formulate demands and expectations to public authorities and other

² Unless otherwise stated all quotes are from the Danish Strategy for Support to Civil Society 2008.

actors. This is an important prerequisite for long-term poverty reduction and promotion of democratisation, and also creates both inclusiveness and cohesion in society”.

Support for a vibrant civil society is thus seen as an end in itself rather than an instrument or a means for other objectives. This distinguishes the Danish strategy from most other donor strategies where civil society is mainly seen as an instrument for other purposes and where support is provided through various donor programmes within e.g. social services, governance, democratisation etc.

The Danish experience shows that a strategic focus on support for a strong, independent and diversified civil society provides a basis for promoting independent voices, local ownership and organisational sustainability which is not the case within predefined and targeted donor programmes. Promotion of a strong, independent and diverse civil society is a sound basis for supporting the implementation of core principles of the civil society aid effectiveness agenda as outlined in the *Istanbul and Siem Reap Consensus*. This includes *alignment* to southern civil society agendas, strategies and policies hereby strengthening *democratic ownership*, knowledge sharing between north and south and the *pursuit of equitable partnerships and solidarity*.

In line with the Danish strategy the *EC Communication on Civil Society Organisations in Development* acknowledges the importance of support for a strong and vibrant civil society in promotion of democracy, and that support for a strong and independent civil society is an asset in itself. Unlike the Danish strategy the EC communication only sees this as one of several approaches to civil society support. There is no problem *per se* in having more purposes and approaches to civil society support. It is however important that the funding instruments and modalities distinguish between the two aims and correspond to the purpose of the intervention. Fairly short-term activity funding of individual project activities based on open or thematic calls for proposals might be adequate where the local CSO's are merely service providers. But if the aim is to promote strong and independent civil society organisations, then short term individual funding, often based on calls for proposal, has proven to be inadequate.

The Danish experience shows that a strong and independent civil society is best promoted when:

- Long term north-south partnership relations can be formed based on secure long term funding.
- Funding includes the potential for core funding of partner organisations, and the implementation of own strategies.

The EC Communication on Civil Society Organisations in Development Cooperation mentions a number of funding modalities including core funding, however there are no considerations of their purpose nor of when to apply them. Even more problematic, in light of existing EU practice for civil society support, which has mainly been provided based on open (non-state actors) or thematic calls for proposals, is the absence of concrete considerations and guidelines for the use of various funding modalities. Unless this is concretised further there exists a considerable risk that the intentions on strategic funding for civil society growth will never be achieved.

3.4 The role of North South Civil society cooperation

The *EC Communication on Civil Society Organisations in Development* is rather silent on north-south civil society relationships and where it is mentioned it is a rather instrumental relationship. The focus is on northern involvement in capacity building, northern NGOs monitoring policy coherence for development, holding the international community to account for delivering aid commitments or contributing to global citizens' awareness. This focus appears to be a by-product of a overtly southern focus and a concern for southern relevance and ownership. While Concord Denmark shares this concern and supports a strong south focus in the EC Communication, we find that the strategy risks losing some of the most relevant experiences of north-south cooperation based on shared aspiration, and joint interventions. Furthermore, no mentions of promotion of shared own agendas of north-south solidarity appear in the EC Communication.

In the subsequent sections the potential for north south partnerships and the potential for northern civil society playing a central role in promoting truly joint agendas will be further elaborated.

3.5 Partnership, long term commitment and local ownership

The *EC Communication on Civil Society Organisations in Development* mentions that the "EU will support long-term and equitable partnerships for capacity development between local and European CSOs. These should be based on local demands, include mentoring and coaching, peer learning, networking, and building of linkages from the local to the global level". The fundamental aim in the EC Communication is difficult to disagree with, however as long as there is no concrete strategy for how this is going to be implemented, the aims appear to be wishful thinking and rather idealistic. A fundamental rethinking of EU aid modalities is needed. The present dominance of open calls for proposal is promoting opportunistic, short term and un-strategic thinking and often has a limited or even negative impact on civil society development. The Danish experience with long term funding mechanisms could be useful for the elaboration of a new approach to strategic funding.

The Danish civil society strategy is based on partnership as the foundation for north-south cooperation. In the Danish Strategy partnership is defined as long-term cooperation based on shared objectives and often shared values between north and south. The aim of the partnership is to promote southern ownership, where the northern NGO takes more of a supportive and facilitative role, as a resource to be drawn upon and a partner in areas like international advocacy. It should be acknowledged that shifting the approach from one of northern dominance to one of strategic partnerships has not always been easy. However more than 10 years of experience with implementing a strategy based on partnership has proven that north-south partnerships are a feasible mechanism to promote a strong and independent civil society in the south and that they are conducive to the development of new and valuable relationships based on solidarity and shared interest.

Important preconditions for funding partnerships are: predictability, a long-term time perspective, flexibility, the potential for including organisational support (including core funding) and capacity building

of partner organisations along with activity funding³. The most successful Danish experience in securing such preconditions has been within long-term flexible frame funding mechanisms with Danish NGOs. The Danish approach to north-south partnership is neither unique, nor the only feasible way of supporting civil society growth in the south. CONCORD Denmark would however strongly recommend that clear instruments and modalities are developed that support equitable north-south cooperation.

3.6 Advocacy, capacity building and service delivery

The *EC Communication on Civil Society Organisations in Development* emphasises the role of civil society in promoting good governance, transparency and strengthening independent southern voices. The strategy also emphasises capacity building and advocacy. The strategy is somewhat ambiguous on the role of civil society in provision of services. The EC Communication, like the Danish Civil Society Strategy, sees a role for civil society in service delivery in fragile situations where state capacity is lacking. Though the EC Communication lacks clarity on the use of service delivery, it does caution against civil society engaging in uncoordinated service delivery and remains open to some form of involvement. The Danish strategy is much more restrictive on the role of civil society in service delivery as Danish funding can only be used for service delivery in exceptional cases. Based on the Danida strategy the Danish NGO Forum has developed a concept for when and how service delivery can play a role and be funded. The basic concept has been captured in the development triangle where advocacy and capacity building is seen as the core focus areas of Danish support, but where service delivery can form an integral part of the support if it serves a purpose with regard to advocacy and/or capacity building. This could be as pilot initiatives as part of an advocacy strategy, or as an integral part of local capacity development. Here, the Danish approach might serve as a case of inspiration, but what is important is that the EC Communication sharpens the principles guiding the use of service delivery and how it will be integrated in national Roadmaps.

3.7 Support for open space, platforms and policy processes and dialogue

The EC communication provides an opportunity to support activities at the European and global level and for dialogue between the EU and European CSOs. Both the potential for funding of European and global processes and the opportunity for dialogue are important for engaging civil society in policy issues. The importance of south-north partnerships in these processes as outlined in the EC Communication is equally essential, though the mechanisms for funding and dialogue are still to be developed. Based on Danish support to similar global processes such as the COP processes around climate change, CONCORD Denmark finds that it is essential that support for global processes are sufficiently open and flexible to ensure that the framework can secure space for emerging locally owned civil society agendas.

3.8 Popular support more than capacity for public fundraising

³ The preconditions mentioned are very similar to the ones promoted as good development practice in the *Istanbul CSO Development Effectiveness Principles* and the *Siem Reap Consensus on the International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness*.

In line with existing EC policies the Danish civil society strategy underlines the importance of public support for European and Danish partner organisations. The capacity to secure funding from public fundraising is used as a parameter for gauging public support by both EC and Danida. However, Danida acknowledges that particularly when it comes to small and medium sized Danish NGOs who do not have the infrastructure for public fundraising, popular support often takes diverse forms, including involvement of a huge amount of voluntary input and the capacity to engage local communities and target groups otherwise not reached by the larger development organisations. The EC Communication is silent on the issues of popular foundation but recent practice within the EC has been that popular foundation is equal to capacity to undertake public fundraising. To support a pluralistic and representative involvement in development along with direct popular engagement with development in the EU member states it will be necessary to broaden the understanding and criteria for popular foundation.

3.9 Development Education – Northern NGOs have an important role in increasing understanding and support for development assistance

This note has so far focused on a critical reflection on the experiences from Danish Civil Society support. However one area where the implementation is lacking is with regard to support for development education. The resources available for Danish NGOs for development education have in recent years been diminishing and this has had a negative effect on the broad based engagement in development issues in Denmark. Though the EC communication is silent on development education, CONCORD Denmark finds that European civil society organisations play a unique and important part in securing popular understanding of the complexity and importance of development cooperation. The EU could therefore play an important complementary role in funding European and national development education initiatives. The nature of EU could furthermore be an important asset in securing the independence of development education from national interests.

4. Recommendations to EC Communication

Based on the findings presented in this paper, CONCORD Denmark has the following recommendations:

1. Support for an enabling environment, and increased space for civil society work, should be an integral part of the civil society strategy while coherence between various EU instruments must be promoted. The roadmaps and their recurring update could be an important instrument in monitoring and documenting the development in civil society space and for dialogue with host governments.
2. A major concern is that the overall strategy is not supported by sufficiently concrete considerations on instruments and modalities for implementation. The EC Communication should ensure

coherence between the overall principle of the strategy and the aid modalities. There is a need for a range of funding modalities, including project-, programme- and organisational funding to ensure diversity, relevance and flexibility.

3. The importance of contextual issues is underlined and the intentions of developing national roadmaps are appreciated. It is however a concern that the means and methods are not outlined including the roles of national civil society and EC member states. Furthermore, it is a concern that the roadmap could limit the responsiveness to change, emerging agendas and innovative independent civil society initiatives. A balance needs to be reached between a strategic approach and responsiveness to a rapidly shifting environment.
4. Support for civil society as an end in itself should form a central, if not the central, part of the EC strategy. This should be reflected throughout the strategy when it comes to aid modalities and approaches to civil society support.
5. Concrete modalities that support long term partnerships, flexibility in funding modality to secure responsiveness and support for southern ownership should be emphasised.
6. The EC Communication is prescriptive and instrumental in its perspective on the role of civil society. The importance of providing scope for the development and support of own civil society agendas needs to be acknowledged.
7. The role and relationship between north and south civil society is not sufficiently addressed and at times rather instrumental. Equitable north-south partnerships have proven to be an important tool for the development of strong independent civil society agendas in both the north and south. Partnership need to have a more prominent role in the implementation of the strategy.
8. The principles for support to civil society service delivery need to be clarified.
9. The potential for support for European and global civil society agendas is welcomed, however an increased focus on north-south partnership is needed and should be supported by a flexibility in funding that allows for the development of strong own civil society agendas.
10. The importance of diversity of civil society in both the north and south should be an important consideration in selecting instruments and modalities for the implementation of the EC Communication.