



Rights-based civil society work

- how partners can operate in an accountable, inclusive and transparent manner

1. WHY RIGHTS-BASED CIVIL SOCIETY WORK MATTERS

Experience shows that the fight against poverty and inequality, promoting sustainable development in favour of poor people and excluded groups, is more likely to succeed when civil society organisations (CSOs) take a rights-based approach in an accountable, inclusive and transparent manner.

CSOs have a number of rights, such as to organise and express themselves. At the same time, they have a duty to be trustworthy and accountable. This calls for them to use their rights to develop themselves so as to become legitimate in the eyes of target groups, members and partners. This is becoming increasingly important, since CSOs used to gain legitimacy largely by delivering services, but are today becoming more and more involved in advocacy. In this role, it is easy for authorities to discredit CSOs, if they are not viewed as legitimate, as the powers that be often dislike interference in their dealings. Moreover, the past 20 years have seen a rising number of CSOs, some of which have used poor target groups as a means of promoting their own interests. This has contributed to the development of distrust of civil society in some countries.

This makes it crucial that CSOs use their rights to operate in an accountable manner, fulfilling their obligations towards their target groups, members and partners. This emphasis on both rights and accountability is at the heart of CISU's strategy as well as Danida's "The World 2030: Denmark's strategy for development cooperation and humanitarian action" and "Policy for Danish support to civil society". By developing their organisational capacity, CSOs can become more accountable, thus working to become legitimate in the eyes of their target groups, members and partners.

2. WHAT DOES RIGHTS-BASED WORK MEAN?

CSOs can develop organisational capacity in adhering to the principles of the rights-based approach: participation, accountability, non-discrimination and

transparency.

The principle of participation implies that those CSOs that help target groups gain influence on decisions affecting their lives and hold duty bearers to account must also allow participation in their own work and be accountable themselves.

Rights holders, including excluded groups dependent on the work of CSOs, must therefore be granted access to information to hold CSOs to account.

Civil society can play a significant role by representing and empowering the groups that are most vulnerable to discrimination. Non-discrimination calls for a strong and independent civil society that is capable of fighting for and acting as a voice of citizens, particularly the most excluded population groups, at the same time as the organisations themselves must refrain from discriminating in their work.

Transparency requires CSOs to be open about their mode of operation, their finances and the results that they achieve. If civil society actors want to ensure adherence to the principles of the rights-based approach, they must start at home by adhering to the principles within their own organisations.

3. RIGHTS-BASED WORK IN PRACTICE

Participation

CSOs work to improve people's lot and opportunities to do what they want in life. Some CSOs do so in close cooperation with their target groups, while others do so on behalf of their target groups. In both cases, CSOs must do their utmost to facilitate people getting involved in their own development. This refers to, for instance, inviting target groups to take part in planning and implementing interventions and in monitoring and measuring the extent to which the desired improvements in living conditions are being achieved. Working processes and systems should be designed so as to give target groups a genuine chance of getting

involved and knowing how far implementation has advanced. Many problems affecting people's living conditions are so comprehensive and complex that the best way to address them is often for CSOs to join forces in networks and alliances.

Accountability

Accountability describes the responsibility to respond that is undertaken by a person or an organisation when others put their trust in them (give them a mandate). For instance, a board is accountable to the rank-and-file members who elected it, while the management has to report to the same board. For accountability to work, those reported to must be capable of understanding what is reported. And if errors or omissions are detected, those reported to must be able to invoke consequences. For example, the members of a CSO should receive the board's report on time and in a language that they understand, and if they are dissatisfied with the board's efforts, they should be able to elect a new one.

Accountability can be perceived as consisting of four dimensions:

Upward accountability – to donors

Upward accountability often draws the most attention and energy, referring to the CSO's reporting to any do-

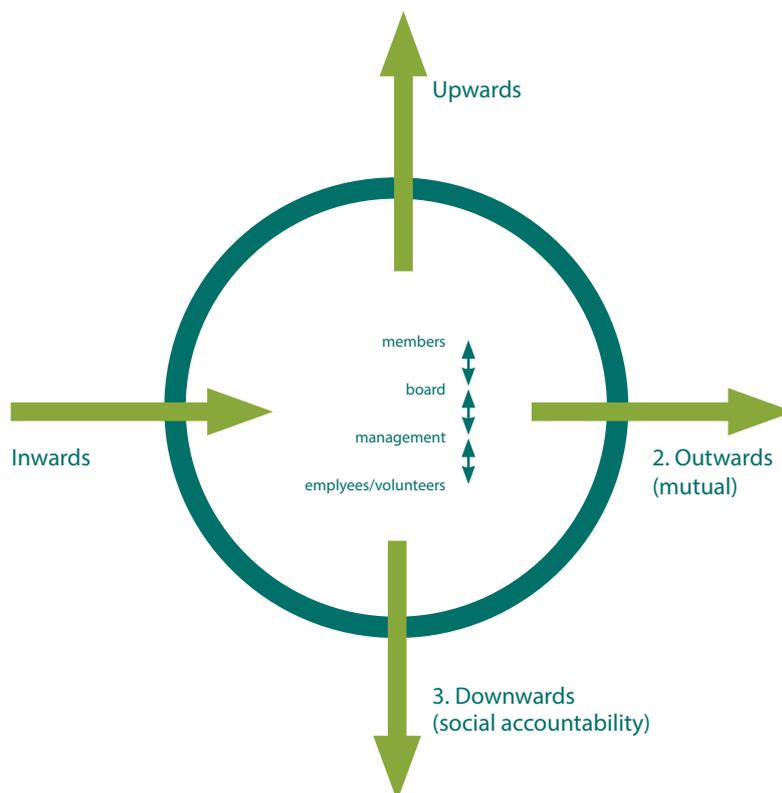
nors, the management's reporting to its board, employees' reporting to the management, etc. Power relations between these levels tend to cause much energy to be invested in this effort, since the level above has the option of imposing sanctions if reporting fails to be carried out satisfactorily.

Outward accountability (mutual) – to partners

Outward accountability describes a genuinely mutual relationship, involving a shared responsibility within a well-defined field. When talking about CSOs, this typically refers to the relationship with partners and other CSOs working in the same area, geographically or thematically, or with which cooperation takes place, e.g. through networks or alliances. A special form of mutual accountability takes place in CISU-funded interventions, where partners must hold each other mutually to account by means of both the Danish and the partner CSO reporting to one another.

Inward accountability – within the organisation

In a CSO with solid internal relations of accountability, the risk of fraud and corruption is low. Inward accountability refers to relations between the various levels within a CSO. Good inward accountability tends to be characterised by a high degree of internal information exchange, as well as mutual understanding and respect for the roles and responsibilities of the vari-



ous levels. This includes ways for powerful persons to be held accountable and, for example, statutes laying down how powerful persons could be replaced.

Downward accountability – to target groups

Where accountability also runs downwards to target groups, it fosters a sense of mutuality which matches the perception that duties are accompanied by rights. For example, when poor people invest their time and energy in a CSO which involves them in an intervention, they are entitled to expect the organisation to live up to its responsibilities, enabling them to hold the organisation to account, e.g. by means of participation, information-sharing and complaints mechanisms.

Non-discrimination

Since human rights are universal, they apply to all people regardless of gender, faith, race, ethnicity, political persuasion and sexual orientation. This means that CSOs, in their planning, implementation and monitoring of activities, must be inclusive and not discriminate against particular groups. This requirement takes on even greater importance given that CSOs often work with vulnerable and excluded population groups.

In addition to working in a non-discriminatory fashion, civil society has a special role to play by representing and empowering those groups that are most exposed to discrimination. In some cases, promoting the rights of vulnerable groups calls for favouring certain categories of people. Here it must be kept in mind that such special treatment can be perceived by other groups as discrimination. This makes it important to openly explain the reason for this favourable treatment and how it aims to ensure that vulnerable groups may enjoy exactly the same rights as other citizens.

Transparency

Transparency is about allowing openness and taking the initiative to inform about decision-making processes, actions and results, and, through financial reporting, to make known what resources are at hand, how much of these are spent and in what manner in order to achieve what. Such underpinnings serve to make governing bodies and managers act in accordance with what has been agreed in a transparent and understandable manner, so that they pursue the interests of members and target groups, and not their own.

Ensuring transparency in one's organisation may entail, for example, addressing issues such as:

Guidelines, plans and targets for the CSO's work which are known by all stakeholders.

The board's presentation of budgets and accounts to members.

Members (and possibly other stakeholders) having the capacity and knowledge to understand what they are looking at, e.g. qualifications needed to understand budgeting, accounts, outputs and indicators.

In some countries, a legal framework is in force for CSOs, which upholds transparency and combats corruption (e.g. publication of audited accounts and annual reports, published lists of board members and managers, etc.). In other countries where the space for civil society is shrinking, it can be difficult for CSOs to make themselves publicly transparent without incurring persecution by the authorities. In such cases it is necessary, based on an understanding of the context, to attempt to work purposefully in favour of transparency.

4. WITH THIS THEMATIC PAPER, CISU WISHES TO PROMOTE that Danish development organisations and their partners take a rights-based approach to development.

When CISU's member organisations work with a rights-based approach, four fundamental principles all need to be in place before intervening in local conditions. Otherwise, the essential legitimacy* will be found wanting. Of course, this applies both to the Danish organisation and to the local partner.

The four principles are:

- Participation: both members and users can get involved in the planning of your development and humanitarian work.
- Accountability: your work for the cause comes with responsibilities, and those affected by the cause can hold you to account.
- Non-discrimination: you cannot discriminate against particular groups.
- Transparency: you communicate openly and honestly. The persons affected by the development work perceive your organisation and partner as open, straightforward and accessible.

CISU also wishes to promote the understanding that local conditions vary, thus setting a unique stage for development work and partnerships. Working with rights-based development is a continuous process, and there must be room for adjustment over time.

5. HOW TO USE CISU

Funds: Organisations can apply to CISU's funds to obtain support for development cooperation with partners in the field of capacity development.

Capacity services: CISU's member organisations may turn to CISU for advice on how to work with organisational capacity development. They may also attend CISU's courses or suggest subjects to be addressed by CISU.

6. IF YOU WANT TO KNOW AND DO MORE

Guides on organisational development and tools for organisational focus on accountability are available here:
<http://www.cisu.dk/værktøj-metoder/organisationsudvikling>

CISU has two fundamental recommendations for advancing the rights-based work of organisations:

- Make sure that you and your partner have reached a common understanding of how you will cultivate participation, accountability, non-discrimination and transparency within your partnership.
- Make sure that you and your partner are clear about how your partnership can increase participation, accountability, non-discrimination and transparency in relation to your target groups and other partners.

CISU'S THEMATIC PAPERS

CISU draws up thematic papers setting out our view of how our member organisations may understand, interpret and apply various key concepts in civil society cooperation.

The thematic papers are based on our practice and experience of member organisations' international work, our advisory services and courses, as well as our administration of funds open for applications.

The thematic papers are approved by CISU's Board. They are not carved in stone, but will be revised at appropriate intervals in view of experience gained. Moreover, new position papers will be drawn up on other issues.

Find the latest version and other position papers at: www.cisu.dk/værktøj-metoder/cisu-temapapirer.

