

VOLUME 17 NUMBER 1

CMI BRIEF

JANUARY 2018



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Strengthening civil society in developing countries?

Development aid and Norwegian organisations

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Norway channels a large portion of its development aid budget through Norwegian civil society organisations. This also includes disbursements from Norad's civil society grant for strengthening civil society where more than 98% has been channelled through Norwegian organisations. This brief summarises some of the key findings from a 2017 evaluation commissioned by Norad's evaluation department. The evaluation gives credit to the work done by Norwegian civil society organisation and their partners to strengthen civil society in developing countries. However, the evaluation also finds that effectiveness in relation to civil society strengthening is currently not optimal. There are several areas for improvement, including the role of Norwegian organisations.

The purpose of the evaluation is to provide Norad and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs with information that can be used to improve future efforts to strengthening civil society in developing countries. The objectives are to assess and document effects of Norwegian aid through Norwegian civil society organisations and their local partners. This includes the effects of using Norwegian civil society organisations as intermediaries.

The evaluation covered the 2006-2016 period. Data was collected from interviews with nearly 500 persons, a survey among staff of Norwegian organisations and project documents from selected partnerships together with an extensive review of scholarly studies and evaluation reports.

Norwegian civil society organisations are playing an increasingly important role as a channel for Norwegian development aid. Currently, more than 20% of the aid budget is channelled through Norwegian organisations. These organisations are also virtually the only channel for the Norad civil society grant – the main Norwegian funding mechanism for long-term support for strengthening of civil society and democratisation in developing countries. This grant was the focus for an evaluation carried out by an international team led by the Chr. Michelsen Institute in cooperation with Nordic Consulting Group (Oslo) and Ternstrom Consulting (Stockholm).

More than 250 Norwegian organisations have received support from Norad's civil society grant in the 2006–2016 evaluation period. The evaluation assessed Norwegian civil society support to Ethiopia, Nepal and Uganda – three of the main recipients of civil society support. More than 60 Norwegian organisations have received funding from this grant for

support to local organisations in these three countries. In addition, there is significant financial support from other funding sources in the Norwegian aid budget. A significant share of Norwegian aid to these three countries is channelled through Norwegian and other NGOs – 47% in Ethiopia, 30% in Nepal and 33% in the case of Uganda.

Norad's Civil Society Grant provides long-term support for civil society strengthening in developing countries. The main objective of this grant is to contribute to a stronger civil society in developing countries with the ability and capacity to promote democratisation, realisation of human rights and poverty reduction. Since 2006 about 5% of total Norwegian aid has been disbursed through this grant.

Norwegian aid to civil society in Ethiopia, Nepal, Uganda and globally (2006–2015) as share of total Norwegian aid (NOK million)

	Ethiopia	Nepal	Uganda	Global
Long term aid for civil society strengthening through Norwegian CSOs (Norad's civil society grant)	560.0	391.2	620.9	12 901.5
Long term aid through international CSOs and direct to civil society in the recipient country (Norad's civil society grant)	0.3	1.7	1.8	245.3
Aid from other budget sources channelled through Norwegian and international CSOs and/or directly to local CSOs	672.5	444.0	672.1	25 187.0
Total Norwegian development aid	2 631.5	2 771.7	3 940.2	269 189.0

Different partnerships, but many good results

A wide variety of Norwegian organisations receives funds from Norad's civil society grant. These include religious and missionary organisations, trade unions, environmental groups, interest organisations for people with disabilities and many others. In the past, many of these organisations were operational and implemented projects on their own. This is no longer the case. They all work with local partners and implement projects and programmes through them.

However, the Norwegian organisations have different approaches to partnerships and civil society strengthening. Some Norwegian organisations have an instrumental approach and search for partners that can implement Norwegian policy objectives and projects. For other Norwegian organisations, strengthening their local partner is a main objective. Most Norwegian organisations place themselves somewhere along a continuum between these two positions. Some Norwegian organisations work through their international federations and international organisations and their country offices (such as Save the Children, Plan or World Wildlife Fund). Other Norwegian organisations have established their own country offices (such as the Norwegian Church Aid, the Development Fund and the Stromme Foundation) while some manage their support to partners directly from Norway (such as organisations in the Atlas Alliance or the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions). However, different approaches also reflect that the Norad civil society grant makes funds available for a variety of purposes and activities under the broad heading "civil society strengthening".

The evaluation found many good results from the support to local civil society partners. The overall finding is that projects progress well – activities are implemented and outputs delivered as planned and short-term objectives are largely achieved. Individuals and communities benefit from direct and indirect support in areas such as health, education, micro-credit or agriculture. All the Norwegian organisations studied have contributed to strengthening civil society organisations in one way or another. Local partners have been strengthened, more grassroots organisations have been formed, and individuals have been empowered.

However, this evaluation of Norad's civil society grant also finds that effectiveness in relation to civil society strengthening is currently not optimal. The support provided is not guided by any overall and coherent assessment of civil society challenges at the

country level, there is limited coordination between the Norwegian organisations, and between the Norad civil society grant and other Norwegian support to civil society, and there is an emphasis on reporting on results for service delivery with insufficient attention to measuring results in relation to civil society strengthening.

Do Norwegian organisations add value?

What value do the Norwegian organisations bring to their local partners beyond the financial support? In general, the evaluation found that Norwegian civil society organisations are perceived by most local partners as friendly, flexible and predictable with long-term commitment. They often compare favourably with many other northern and international NGOs.

However, the evaluation found few examples of Norwegian organisations documenting the value added of their role in civil society strengthening. Nor did we find much emphasis on preparing and planning for such value addition. The evaluation assessed value addition along three dimensions:

- Intermediary between the local partner and the donor agency (Norad). Most Norwegian organisations score high on this issue. This dimension has become more important with increasing demands on monitoring and reports on results and may have contributed to a stronger emphasis on the need for compliance with donor requirements;
- Provider of technical support to administrative and organisational development of the partner, including facilitation of networking with others. Most Norwegian organisations provide support for organisational development and strengthening of local partners. There is however much focus on financial management and reporting and less on organisational management and internal governance.
- Provider of professional support for programme development and implementation. The emphasis on this is more limited compared to the other two areas, but some organisations are very good in providing such professional support.

The different partnership approaches identified have different strengths and weaknesses in relation to value addition. Major Norwegian organisations working through country offices or international organisations

may be in a position to reach more people and provide professional support in delivery of services. However, the evaluation also found important value addition from smaller Norwegian organisations operating from Norway establishing direct relations with likeminded local organisations.

Norwegian civil society organisations may also have a value added in relation to Norwegian aid management and the Norwegian public. These have not been examined in this evaluation. The valued added here may include: providing insights and experience from working on the ground, often from working among the poor and vulnerable and in marginal areas; providing management capacity to support civil society organisations and implementation of development projects. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norad and the embassies do not have the capacity to provide similar support; and educating and mobilising Norwegian opinion about global development issues

Towards improved results

Norwegian organisations have made much progress in developing policies and programmes for supporting civil society in developing countries. The strength of the Norwegian approach is the flourishing of a multitude of approaches, ability to experiment and to take risks, and to support a wide variety of partnerships. The weakness is the lack of a strategic framework for Norwegian civil society support at country level – nor any overall assessment of needs and opportunities as a basis for making strategic choices and securing optimal impact. The civil society portfolio in each country is highly fragmented between the respective Norwegian civil society organisations and between the organisations, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Embassies and Norad. The whole is the sum of all the independent and often isolated parts.

Additionally, the evaluation period has witnessed several trends affecting the state of civil society in developing countries and foreign support for civil society strengthening. This will have implications for Norwegian civil society organisations. The new trends include

- Strengthening of professional civil society organisations in many developing countries. This has led to increasing demands for more direct transfer of financial support from donor agencies to local organisations without the use of intermediaries. A related trend is the emergence of local development consultants that can assist and help local organisations to meet donor requirements related to applications, monitoring and reporting;
- Several donor agencies now provide direct support to local civil society organisations through joint funding and joint support mechanisms for civil society strengthening; and
- Shrinking space for civil society action in many developing countries and restriction on foreign support to local civil society organisations, particularly for organisations working on human rights and democratisation.

The evaluation recommends a more strategic use of the Norad civil society grant. This includes more focus on identifying the value added of the contribution by Norwegian civil society organisations. It also calls for support mechanisms that empower and create stronger ownership among southern civil society organisations.

The evaluation was carried out by an international team led by the Chr. Michelsen Institute in cooperation with Nordic Consulting Group (Oslo) and Ternstrom Consulting (Stockholm). The final report was submitted in December 2017 and published by Norad on 31 January 2018.