What Can Donor Countries Do to Expand Civic Space?

Civil society is fundamental to advancing development and humanitarian assistance efforts. Civil society actors can often be important development and humanitarian actors, ensuring outcomes that are equitable, sustainable, and inclusive. In partnership with international donors, they can also draw on their expertise and connections to local communities to help design and implement programming.

In all too many countries, though, civil society is subject to heavy constraints. Some donor governments have recognized the importance of serving as allies to embattled civil society partners: providing resources to push back against restrictive measures and practices and encouraging partner governments to respect civic freedoms through bilateral exchanges and discussions at international fora. Until now, though, donor governments had lacked systematic guidance on how best to support an enabling environment for civil society. The OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), a group of the world's major donor countries, has now acted to fill this gap.

On July 5, 2021, the DAC adopted the *Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance*, their first-ever policy instrument on enabling civil society. The Recommendation, building on years of work by the OECD's Development Co-operation Directorate (DCD) and civil society partners, identifies 28 key principles that donor governments should follow to respect, protect, and promote civic space; support and engage with civil society; and incentivize civil society organization (CSO) effectiveness, transparency, and accountability.

The Recommendation is short and direct – its key principles are set out in just under 1250 words. They set out a roadmap for donor governments to follow to support civil society in countries and territories where they provide assistance. Full implementation of the Recommendation by DAC members would go a long way towards implementing development effectiveness principles, with a major impact on the enabling environment for civil society in partner countries. The DCD intends to support implementation by working with DAC members and civil society partners to develop guidance for states and reviewing implementation through the OECD peer review mechanism, among other means.

What Donor Countries Can Do Now

DAC members, however, can begin implementing the Recommendation's provisions immediately. Here are three steps members can take now to begin delivering on the promise of the Recommendation and advance an enabling environment for civil society:

1. Develop enabling policies. DAC members should develop and strengthen policies guiding cooperation with civil society that clearly set out planned engagement to defend civic space.

DAC members could take immediate steps to develop or strengthen civil society policies that clearly set out the centrality of civic space and civil society to their development and humanitarian assistance activities, and which outline a strategy for promoting civic space through these activities.

Some DAC members' civil society policies already address strategies and actions to expand civic space; notable examples include the policies of Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Even in these cases, there may be scope for inter-governmental learning to strengthen these policies. DAC members may wish to revise existing policies, for example, to incorporate explicit linkages to their diplomatic engagement to expand civic space (as Canada and Finland have done); to specify how civic space will be addressed in dialogues with partner governments (as in the case of Ireland); or to stand up specific assistance programs to foster effective civil society advocacy on civic space issues (as the Netherlands has done). DAC members may even consider developing focused strategies to expand civic space or support civil society participation in policymaking (see, e.g., 2012 and 2017 reports by Denmark and Sweden, respectively). In fact, many of the principles set out in Pillar One of the Recommendation, regarding respecting, protecting, and promoting civic space, might be productively addressed in DAC members' civil society policies. These include "[s]upport[ing] and engag[ing] with international, regional, and national bodies and initiatives that work to respect, protect, and promote civic space," "prevent[ing] unintended consequences due to misinterpretation or misapplication of anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing standards," and "[w]ork[ing] with the private sector and independent media … to respect, protect and promote open civic space."

Donor governments should develop and refine their civil society policies through an open process of consultation with civil society partners, including member-country, international, and partner-country CSOs. By setting down, in writing their priorities and strategies for civil society cooperation and engagement to expand civic space, donor governments can better translate these commitments into action.

2. Strengthen consultation requirements. DAC members should bolster processes and requirements for conducting consultations with civil society on development co-operation and humanitarian assistance projects, including requirements applicable to partner governments.

Most DAC members already conduct consultations with CSOs regarding programs in partner countries, as the OECD and UNDP noted in a [2019 report](#) by the OECD and UNDP. There is room for improvement in this area, though. CSOs report that consultation with donors is generally "episodic, unpredictable and not systematically conducted"; consultations are primarily structured to address donor agendas and priorities; and consultations are not inclusive of a diverse range of CSOs. In its [2020 report](#), the OECD also notes that DAC member consultations with civil society are mostly held with member-country CSOs, and that dialogues at the partner country level are often held on a parallel basis without coordination, multiplying the demands imposed on local CSOs.

The Recommendation urges DAC members to "[p]ursue civil society actors' participation, especially in partner countries or territories where appropriate and feasible, in Adherents' policy and programme priority-setting, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation through more structured, institutionalised, inclusive, and accessible dialogue." Creating more robust opportunities for civil society input into member-supported development and assistance interventions can not only promote more effective and equitable programs, but also help achieve another principle from the Recommendation: ensuring that these interventions "do no harm to civic space in partner countries or territories."

DAC members should explore developing, revising, and strengthening policies and procedures for conducting civil society consultations. Member policies should provide, for example, that civil society consultations will be held on a regular basis with a diverse range of CSOs including local organizations from partner countries; that civil society will have scope to shape the content of consultations; and that members will coordinate to reduce demands on local civil society. The UN *[Guidelines for States on the effective implementation of the right to participate in public affairs](#)* and the Task Team's *[Guidance and Good Practice on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment](#)* can provide valuable principles and practices on ensuring meaningful participation by a range of civil society actors.

In strengthening their own consultation mechanisms, DAC members should also consider bolstering requirements for partner governments to conduct genuine and inclusive civil society consultations on government-implemented development and humanitarian assistance activities. In a [2016 OECD/UNDP report](#), almost 90% of partner governments reported consulting CSOs on the design, implementation, and monitoring of national development policies. However, CSOs have described the limited effectiveness of these consultations. For these consultations to provide genuine opportunities for dialogue, partner governments need to establish clear procedures for CSO engagement; involve a transparent and representative selection of CSOs; and create effective feedback mechanisms. To "[s]upport greater and more inclusive civil society participation in public policy at all levels of partner country or territory

governments," as the Recommendation urges, DAC members should explore mechanisms for elevating the quality of civil society consultations conducted by partner governments, too.

3. Promote civic space. DAC members should commit to promoting open civic space in discussions with partner governments regarding co-operation and assistance activities.

The Recommendation provides that DAC members should "engage in dialogue with partner country or territory governments … on the value of an inclusive and independent civil society and civil society participation and on respecting, protecting, and promoting civic space." In the 2016 OECD/UNDP report, almost 80% of "development partners" suggested that their policy dialogue with partner governments "includes the promotion of an enabling environment for CSOs as an agenda item." DAC members should explore how to deepen engagement with partner governments to make this dialogue with partner governments on civic space more systematic, specific, and constructive.

In discussions with partner governments, members should consistently seek opportunities to raise reported barriers or obstacles to the free operation of civil society and specific instances of repression of civil society representatives, while praising positive advances in protecting civic space. DAC members should also more generally highlight the ways in which development and assistance activities benefit from civil society leadership, partnership, and input.

The other action points noted above can contribute to achieving this outcome. DAC members can enshrine a commitment to discussing civic space with partner governments in their civil society policies (as Ireland has done). Member consultations with civil society should include civic space concerns as a priority topic for discussion, so that inputs from civil society (especially local CSOs) can inform member discussions with partner governments. And DAC members can raise civic space concerns in discussions with partner government about consultation processes with civil society since restrictions on civil society essentially undermine CSO capacity to provide genuine input into government-led interventions.

The Next Steps

There will be more to do in the coming years. Key priorities include developing resources (with civil society input) that support DAC member implementation of the Recommendation; establishing structures within the DAC for members to share best practices and developments relating to civic space; and creating more pathways and opportunities for member-country, international, and partner-country CSOs to support DAC member efforts to enable civil society.

But DAC members can start taking their own steps to implement the Recommendation now. By acting forthrightly to place civil society and civic space at the center of their development cooperation and humanitarian assistance programs, DAC members can make a major contribution to the task of empowering civil society and expanding civic freedoms – and in doing so, can take a giant step towards advancing effective and equitable development around the world.