Fragile relationships
BUILDING A STRONG AND RESILIENT CIVIL SOCIETY IN SOUTH SUDAN
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1. Executive Summary

With independence in South Sudan comes the opportunity to reflect on the dynamics of the aid architecture and the roles and functions of those within it. Both international and national NGOs are revisiting their approaches to and assumptions about partnership and capacity development. The recent fielding of a scoping mission for a proposed long-term Civil Society Development Fund by the Joint Donor Team (JDT) is evidence of donor interest in this area. A number of other donors are currently reviewing and readjusting aid policies and priorities in light of learning from experience during the transition period and more recent developments such as the economic crisis and escalation in fighting caused by the GROSS decision to shut down the oil pipeline.

Recent interviews with donors, however, suggest that while they recognize the importance of civil society engagement and long-term capacity development support, many are not willing to prioritise funding for this now. They say that ‘now is not the right time’ given growing humanitarian and other needs being generated by escalating conflict, food shortages and budget cuts.

When is it the ‘right time’ to support the development of civil society? Based on the learning from the action research, we argue that that time is now. A stronger and more resilient civil society will be better able to weather the impact of these various crises as well as hold both its government and international actors to account.

This learning brief summarises lessons learnt to date from the PSO-supported Thematic Learning Programme in South Sudan (see p.4 below). Learning has been derived and triangulated from action research being undertaken by four international NGOs and one national NGO, interviews with donor representatives and other key informants, and a series of reflection meetings involving a wide range of stakeholders. The action research activities have focused on the interaction between international NGOs and local NGOs in the aid structure of South Sudan. The TLP methodology helps to ensure that results are translated into action by engaging practitioners collectively as reflective researchers and peer reviewers. Learning from the Thematic Learning Program that is of particular relevance to donors has been extracted and grouped under the following four key questions identified during the process:

1. What is civil society in South Sudan, who defines it, and what are its roles?
2. Do all CBOs and NNGOs lack ‘capacity’? What capacities are needed and how can they best be developed?
3. What can we learn from the experience of ‘partnership’ (including challenges and enabling factors) between international and local actors in South Sudan?
4. How can INGOs and NNGOs institutionalise learning attitudes, approaches and practices? Why is this particularly important in a fragile context like South Sudan?

While the mid-term results of the Thematic Learning Program which inform this learning brief cannot provide the answers to all of these questions, the process has yielded important lessons regarding how donors can play a key role in ensuring that we do things better. In particular, donors should give South Sudanese civil society actors the time, space and support to develop their own agendas, roles and capacities and avoid trying to create a civil society in their own image by imposing thematic boundaries or other prescriptive approaches. Civil society development is a long-term process which requires long-term funding and engagement. However, lessons learned from the Thematic Learning Programme indicate that accelerating or widening the civil society building process prematurely can reduce ownership by the actors involved and result in fragmentation. Donors should encourage INGO and NNGO partners to jointly...
develop, implement and regularly reflect on principles of engagement which will help build trust, enable capacity building and exchange (NNGOs have capacities too), and result in more transparent and effective partnerships. Encouraging and funding INGOs to nurture and further develop the capacity and skills of experienced NNGOs and local/national resource persons to enable them to build capacity of less experienced and able CSOs and NNGOs should also be a key priority for donors.

Finally, as the Thematic Learning approach has already demonstrated, supporting capacity development that is rooted in action research and action learning and investing in joint reflection on actual experience, can also help build more open and trusting relationships between participants, which can in turn create an enabling environment for more effective capacity development. Employing action research and learning methodologies will also help to ensure that actors continuously assess the context and the results of their actions which is particularly important in dynamic and complex environments like South Sudan.

2. Introduction

What and who constitutes ‘civil society’ in a fragile context like South Sudan? Who defines civil society and decides what role(s) it should play and how it can best be supported and developed? These are key questions the Government of the Republic of South Sudan, donors, the UN, INGOs and NNGOs continue to grapple with. While this learning brief cannot provide the answers to all of these questions, mid-term results from a Thematic Learning Program (TLP) which has looked at relationships between selected INGOs and NNGOs – specifically partnership and capacity development approaches – has yielded important lessons regarding how we can do things better.

During the CPA interim period, donors prioritised support for the establishment of a functioning national government in Juba, paying less attention to the roles and capacities of local government and civil society. While competitive processes such as donor calls for proposals have brought INGOs and NNGOs together and given local actors access to short-term funding, the partnerships have often been short-term and superficial, entered into by INGOs to meet donor conditionalities and by NNGOs to access funding. Capacity building has been largely instrumental in nature and usually limited to what skills the NNGO needs to implement a particular project. However, the insufficient resources provided and unrealistically short timeframes have made it difficult for INGOs to build the longer-term institutional capacity of local partners.

With independence in South Sudan comes the opportunity to reflect on the dynamics of the aid architecture and the roles and functions of those within it such as national, state and local government, local and international NGOs, churches, bilateral and multilateral donors, the private sector and the UN. Both international and national NGOs are revisiting their approaches to and assumptions about partnership and capacity development. A number of donors are currently reviewing and readjusting aid policies and priorities in light of learning from experience during the transition period.

2 Ibid; Fenton, W (2008) Funding Mechanisms in Southern Sudan: NGO Perspectives, Juba NGO Forum/Joint Donor Team; PSO, Meeting on roles and responsibilities in the aid structure of South Sudan28th of February 2012, Juba Bridge Hotel.
The recent fielding of a scoping mission for a proposed long-term Civil Society Development Fund by the Joint Donor Team is evidence of donor interest in this area. The Mission’s terms of reference also clearly reflect donor concerns around growing corruption and the role they expect civil society to play in addressing this: “Assess the capacity and options for supporting Civil Society organisations (CSOs) in South Sudan to play a role in holding the Government of South Sudan to account, particularly regarding financial and budgetary issues, and to identify mechanisms through which this can be done.” The Mission’s preliminary findings were:

- Funding for civil society development needs to be committed for the long-term;
- Funding should be needs-based, corresponding to the interest areas and priorities of the CSOs themselves rather than those of donors and INGOs;
- CSO capacity building should be sustained over a long period of time, although what form this will take will vary by CSO and contact.
- CSOs do not want to compete with INGOs for funding
- In relation to Natural Resource Management, Access to Information and Media, and Gender and Women’s rights – the specific sectors the consultants proposed the Fund should prioritise – the critical role of the enabling environment as a precursor to the development of a strong civil society was emphasised.

While INGOs and NGOs present at the Civil Society Development Fund scoping study validation workshop in March 2012 broadly endorsed these findings, there were some important areas of disagreement which the JDT has promised to take into account during fund design. A contradiction was noted, for example, between the intention to base the fund on CSO-identified priorities and the imposition by contributing donors of an advocacy and governance agenda and thematic boundaries. As one CSO representative put it, ‘CSOs’ mandate and activities are currently driven by INGO or donor agendas. Our focus on Wau today instead of Jonglei illustrates this. Concept notes should be based on the needs of people in South Sudan.’ Similarly, the suggestion that service delivery NGOs should be excluded, because they were not focused on accountability and governance issues, was also disputed. The argument was made that the experience of CSOs can be used as an important entry point for engagement in evidence-based advocacy with government.

Recent interviews with donors conducted in relation to the Thematic Learning Program suggest that while they recognize the importance of civil society engagement and long-term capacity development support, many are not willing to prioritise funding for this. They argue that ‘now is not the right time’ given growing humanitarian and other needs being generated by escalating conflict, food shortages and the economic crisis generated by the government’s decision to shut down the oil pipeline.

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3. The Thematic Learning Programme methodology

It is against this background that the Thematic Learning Programme (TLP), focusing on the specific role of civil society actors in the aid architecture, was developed and is being implemented. Given the diversity of civil society actors in South Sudan, the TLP focuses on the interaction between international NGOs and Local NGOs in the aid structure of South Sudan. The TLP methodology (see Box 1) helps to ensure that results are translated into action by engaging practitioners collectively as reflective researchers and peer reviewers.

Box 1: What is a ‘Thematic learning programme’?

A Thematic learning program (TLP) is a focused collective action learning or research program that explores practical solutions to issues in capacity development programs. A TLP aims to build on the existing knowledge base and add information about what works and does not work when applying concepts, tools and assumptions in a specific context. In a TLP the practitioners are both problem owner and researcher who, with expert mentoring support, design, implement, and monitor the programme and collect and make sense of the data. In addition to their own research questions, the participants commit to exploring a collective research question which enables peer learning and adds to the knowledge base of ongoing international development debates.

LET'S MAKE A TLP

GOOD IDEA

NGO HEAD OFFICE

LET'S MAKE A TLP

GOOD IDEA

TLP?

NO WAY!

WE'RE TOO BUSY

LOCAL NGO

LOCAL NGO
PSO has been engaged in an action research-oriented Thematic Learning Programme (TLP) on fragile states since December 2010. In June 2011 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and PSO organized a meeting in The Hague on South Sudan to look at the interface between development and humanitarian aid should the referendum result in the South’s independence. The report of the 2010 Multi-donor Evaluation of Support to Conflict Prevention was the main reference point for the meeting. During a subsequent visit by PSO to Juba in September 2011, five international NGOs expressed an interest in taking part in a TLP to explore the roles and functions of aid actors in South Sudan. Those interested then submitted a concept note to PSO for action research in South Sudan which was subsequently approved and developed into a full proposal. Based on a literature review and the consultations undertaken during the September visit, a scoping paper outlining a possible framework for the TLP was drafted. The TLP framework, action learning questions and methodologies were developed further with prospective participants and key informants in October during a formulation mission to South Sudan. Ultimately, four INGOs (ZOA, SNV, SPARK and Justice Africa) and one NNGO (IPCS) confirmed their commitment to the process and a small reference group was formed. It was agreed that TLP activities would consist of action research activities, two collective learning meetings (February and April 2012) and documentation of results in case reports, learning histories prepared by participating organisations (April 2012), development of a mid-term learning brief targeting the donor community (May 2012), and a final publication targeting practitioners that brings together the lessons learned from the five TLP participants (August 2012).

A key aspect of the Thematic Learning Process is that the action research is intended to trigger changes at organizational level, as well as contribute to a collective learning process. The TLP approach is about facilitating the interplay between the two processes. By linking the results of the organizational action research processes to collective learning questions as well as existing literature and the ‘ongoing debate’, the insights and lessons learned can influence higher level debates and decision-making.

**Figure 1** - Thematic Learning Process

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6 Sara Pantuliano, HPG/ODI; Hafeez Wani, National NGO Forum Coordinator; Irma van Dueren, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

7 Learning histories are an important part of the TLP process as they allow everyone involved to provide their views and perspectives. Learning histories use reflective storytelling to help individuals and organizations evaluate and accelerate progress in learning. Documenting (in writing or using film) the experiences of those involved provides a record of the process and learning which can lead to new and different ways of working. Key to this is joint reflection, through which individual learning can be anchored in the shared learning of the organization as a whole.

8 Anneke Maarse, PSO, provided on 6 May 2012.
Different action learning and research approaches were taken by the different organizations involved in the TLP process. For example, ZOA and IPCS engaged a journalist who wrote a learning history of the partnership based on interviews with staff at different levels in each organization while Justice Africa used film to record interviews with Justice Africa staff and various members of the Civil Society Coalition, Task Force, and Alliance they have supported on their perspectives of the partnership. SNV is implementing its action research activities within a pilot designed to improve coordination of capacity development activities of different donor organizations in a specific geographical area. SPARK has been keeping an observation diary during the partner selection process for their entrepreneurship program.

Although not formally part of the TLP, the insights and perspectives of the National NGO Forum and Pact, a US-based capacity building organization with 10 years of experience of working with and supporting local partners in South Sudan were involved in the collective learning process. Further other external actors such as Oxfam, CARE, the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI, and a range of bilateral and multilateral donors have contributed their knowledge and experience to the process in open meetings or through individual interviews.

4. Lessons from the Thematic Learning Process

This section summarises lessons that have emerged thus far from the action learning carried out under the Thematic Learning Programme which are of most relevance to donors. The lessons are derived from the action research conducted by the TLP participants as well as from a wide range of other actors as mentioned in the previous section, and a literature review.

Some of the key questions that arose out of the collective learning process were:

- What is civil society in South Sudan, who defines it, and what are its roles?
- Do all CBOs and NNGOs lack ‘capacity’? What capacities are needed and how can they best be developed?
- What can we learn from the experience of ‘partnership’ (including challenges and enabling factors) between international and local actors in South Sudan?
- How can INGOs and NNGOs institutionalise learning attitudes, approaches and practices? Why is this particularly important in a fragile context like South Sudan?

Lessons learned are grouped under these key questions.

What is civil society in South Sudan, who defines it, and what are its roles?

Different actors have different views on what the role(s) of civil society are or should be in South Sudan. Donors in particular have made it clear that they want to see civil society engage more in advocacy on governance issues rather than focus exclusively on acting as implementers of service delivery projects. In the short to medium-term, however,
it will be necessary for civil society to continue to support service delivery until local government is able to assume this responsibility. Service delivery can be an entry point for building relations with and influencing local government around not only access to and quality of basic services, but a range of governance issues. There should be a recognition that this role may change and evolve as capacity is developed, experience gained and in response to changes in context. Civil society actors who develop strong links with their constituencies can potentially play a number of different roles, such as giving a voice to marginalized people, and promoting social cohesion and peace building.

Therefore, it is important that stakeholders — including donors, government, UN, INGOs and civil society actors themselves — understand the wide range of roles civil society can play at different times and in different circumstances and support them to do so.

Box 2: Justice Africa — Supporting the development of a civil society alliance

From August 2009 to March 2010, Justice Africa held a series of meetings in Juba with civil society organizations who had diverse areas of interest and operation. The objective of the meetings was to build a coalition of civil society groups which could determine, promote and defend their own agenda. While Justice Africa facilitated the meetings and provided continuous support, it did not determine the direction or activities of the participants and their constituents. The groups identified their own challenges which included a lack of cohesion, limited funding, lack of shared vision and mission, and an overly donor-focused orientation. In addition, they felt that linkages between different actors and groups of actors were weak.

A Southern Sudan Civil Society Coalition with a representative steering committee was formed. The coalition continued to meet regularly to discuss issues of national importance and initiated, planned and conducted the civil society Convention in July 2010 in partnership with Justice Africa. The Convention brought together civil society representatives from all the ten states to form the South Sudan Civil Society Alliance (SSCSA). The process of institutionalizing the SSCSA has been problematic, however, as a result of competition between the former members of the SSCST and the new members of the Alliance. The SSCSA has been more concerned with competing over leadership positions than defining a collective way forward. Justice Africa’s role in this process has also been called into question by some civil society actors, INGOs and donors.

Justice Africa has learned that under such circumstances it is important to see civil society coalition building as a process rather than a series of events or a product. They found that a significant amount of time must be given to building relationships and trust between groups, and that regular meetings can help to achieve this. It is also important for the facilitating organisation (in this case Justice Africa) to ensure that it is perceived as a neutral body by all stakeholders in the process. Misunderstandings regarding its mandate and role resulted in Justice Africa being accused of partisanship and pushing its own agenda, which fuelled already existing divisions and undermined the Alliance. Management of stakeholder expectations — including donors — is also extremely important. Both facilitating organisations and their donors should be careful not to move too quickly or provide too much funding at the beginning of a process as this is likely to fracture already fragile alliances.

Source: Justice Africa presentation at Joint Reflection Meeting in Juba, 26 April 2012.
Donors should not try to create a civil society in South Sudan in their own image by imposing thematic boundaries or other prescriptive approaches. While some donor governments seem to believe that holding government to account should be the main role of South Sudanese civil society actors, feedback obtained during the Thematic Learning Process suggests that this may not be the role all of these actors envisage for themselves – or at least not at this time. It was also noted that it is risky for civil society actors to engage in advocacy at the national level given that the government has not yet accepted this as a legitimate role for them. More research on the role of CSOs and NNGOs in advocacy in South Sudan is necessary to understand how ‘advocacy’ is understood and used in this context and what the potential risks are for CBOs and NNGOs.

The experience of Justice Africa shows that supporting local civil society actors to come together and decide on their own agenda takes time. It is important to consider the context when looking at the sequencing and phasing of civil society development. This is particularly true in a fragile context where social and political cleavages and mistrust prevail. While the original Civil Society Coalition and Task Force coalesced and functioned relatively well, the new Alliance, which has a larger number of smaller, State-based groups and a higher national profile, has experienced problems and is in danger of fragmenting. In such circumstances, it may be necessary to first promote social cohesion within groups, and bring the groups together later once this has been achieved.
Box 3: The evolution of COMPASS

COMPASS is a national NGO formed in Egypt in 1995 by South Sudanese university students with initial funding from the Ford Foundation. In 2002, the members returned to South Sudan and set up COMPASS South Sudan. The organisation was officially registered in 2004 as a legal entity and established long lasting partnerships with INGOs such as ZOA, its main partner.

In 2008 COMPASS began working in Tali payam, Central Equatoria, focusing on primary health care, water and sanitation, and later on immunization. In the initial stages of their partnership, the relationship between ZOA and COMPASS was complementary. COMPASS had local knowledge but limited resources while ZOA had resources but lacked a detailed understanding of the local context. In the following year, COMPASS’ technical, financial and overall management competence steadily improved while ZOA was increasingly able to address the needs and concerns of local communities.

The partners managed to secure strong community engagement in programme design and implementation and projects clearly reflected approaches and ideas acquired from the communities. The growth of community advocacy in Tali Payam is demonstrated by their success in lobbying the State Ministry of Education to enrol in the Alternative Education Programme (AEP) people who had attended the functional adult literacy programme. The Ministry later hired some of the AEP graduates as salaried teachers. The partnership with ZOA helped COMPASS enhance its profile and systems making it one of the first national NGOs to access resources from the Basic Services Fund. It was also selected by the South Sudan referendum bureau as an accredited organisation for electoral monitoring. Through its sustained partnership with ZOA, COMPASS was able to lobby for and access funding and support from Pact and others. The sustained support of these partners over a number of years enabled COMPASS to grow from a small CBO to being a National NGO in South Sudan. COMPASS staff are now themselves in a position to provide training and mentoring support to CBOS and other NNGOs.

Source: NNGO Forum, Pre-meeting with NNGO/INGO Representatives, Narrative Report, 20 April 2012

Do all CBOS and NNGOs lack ‘capacity’?
What capacities are needed and how can they best be developed?

The TLP clearly demonstrates from the action research as well as the outcomes of the collective meetings that while some CBOS and NNGOs lack capacities related to project planning, implementation, monitoring and reporting, not all do. In addition, many local and national organisations have important knowledge and capacities that INGO partners lack such as a detailed understanding of the local society and context, including conflict and power dynamics. This can give CBOS and NNGOs a comparative advantage in local level peace building and advocacy work.
Fragile relationships

ZOA’s and Pact’s long-term partnerships with IPCS and COMPASS in particular have contributed to building the administrative, implementing, governance and advocacy capacity of these national organisations. Both COMPASS and IPCS are now experienced NNGOs in a position to provide mentoring and other capacity development support to other CBOs and NNGOs. **INGOs and donors should nurture and further develop the capacity and skills of experienced NNGOs and the resource persons within them to help build capacity of less experienced and able CSOs and NNGOs.**

It is important for stakeholders (donors, government, UN, INGOs, NNGOs, and CSOs) to have a coordinated approach to capacity development in South Sudan. Evidence from consultations undertaken by Pact and the NNGO Forum suggest that some donors are not aware of existing initiatives around capacity building such as the work of the Capacity building Working Group within the NGO Forum and the database on NNGOs the NNGO Forum is compiling. Many embassies have small funds that can be used for capacity building but these need to be coordinated and applied collectively to achieve greater impact. Organisations like Pact and the NGO Forum can help with coordination of activities, information sharing and lesson learning. Pact is currently helping to take forward an idea proposed by NNGOs and the Capacity Building Working Group regarding the establishment of an accreditation system for capacity building providers.

However, further discussion is needed among NNGO and INGO stakeholders to explore and reach consensus on what mechanisms and standards would be used in a potential accreditation process. This is important as stakeholders are keen to avoid creating a ‘blueprint’ approach or an elite and overstretched group of NNGOs. This process could also help address the difficult problem of how to assess the mandates, constituencies and legitimacy of national NGOs. While we cannot assume that all NNGOs lack capacity in general, or lack the same capacities, experience shows that we also cannot assume that all CBOs and NNGOs represent their constituencies.

Both donors and INGO partners need to set realistic and achievable expectations of local partners, ensuring that proposal and reporting deadlines are realistic and that formats are clear and user-friendly. In one case study documented by the NNGO Forum the INGO demanded an activity report from the local partner at the end of the project quarter, having only transferred the funds for the field activities 8 days before. NNGOs also complain that requests for proposals are usually sent by email, sometimes only a week in advance of the deadline. This creates difficulties for many NNGOs to engage meaningfully in the proposal development process, especially CBOS outside of Juba, who do not have regular access to the internet.

Donors and the INGOs they fund need to move away from an instrumental partnership approach, where the emphasis is on developing short-term capacity to implement a specific and time-bound project, to an open-ended institutional partnership which focuses on organisational development as an end in itself. **Experience shows that effective capacity development requires long-term engagement.**

Pact has over ten years experience of working with up to 150 different civil society organizations across all 10 States in South Sudan. Lessons learned from this experience suggest that it is not possible to adequately build implementation or institutional capacity of this number of partners across such a wide geographical area. Pact is therefore in the process of scaling down to work more intensively with a smaller number of organisations in fewer States/areas where conflict is clustered. As part of this approach Pact piloted the CBO Excellence Initiative last year, which focused on developing the capacity of eighteen organizations Pact staff had identified as strong partners.
Box 4: Pact’s CBO Excellence Initiative

The CBO Excellence Initiative combines trainings, networking within the group, mentoring, and long-term funding as illustrated in this diagram:

The process starts with a comprehensive organisational capacity assessment, conducted by the partner organisation in cooperation with Pact, which identifies priority areas that need to be addressed. Pact has also learned through experience that stand-alone training without follow-up is unlikely to result in sustained change. The programme therefore includes a strong mentoring component in which skilled, field-based mentors follow-up on learning from training events, address capacity needs not covered in trainings, monitor progress against the Organisational Capacity Assessment action plans, and act as the link into the Juba-based Mentor Support Network. There is continuous contact and follow up on how they are putting what they learn into practice.

Key features of this programme include the following:

- Money is provided for the running and development costs and makes them available for other activities
- Opportunities to practice what they learn within programmes
- Mentoring system – each partner is assigned a field-based mentor (Pact staff member) who follows up and works on issues identified.
- Juba-based support network – CBOs can learn from each other as well as from Pact mentors.

Provided funding can be obtained, Pact is planning to expand this pilot initiative in 2012 to a three year programme.

*Source: Pact CBO Excellence Initiative – Civil Society Strengthening for Pact’s Strategic Partners, concept note, undated.*

This approach emphasises mentoring and networking and provides opportunities for CBOs to practice using what they learn within programmes.

What can we learn from the experience of ‘partnership’ (including challenges and enabling factors) between international and local actors in South Sudan?

The experience of several members of the NNGO Forum suggests that it is important to improve transparency in partnerships with local partners by involving them at every stage of the design phase, ensuring the budget allocation process is fair and transparent, and preparing and sharing with them donor reports and donor feedback on these. Based on unsatisfactory experiences, some NNGOs feel strongly that they should have direct links with donors rather than having to go through an intermediary INGO.
Box 5: A need for greater transparency

An INGO and NNGO developed a project for a donor which clearly specified the roles of the implementing partners. However, the project document signed by the INGO and the donor differed significantly from what was originally discussed with the NNGO partner. The changes had not been discussed with the NNGO nor was it present at the signing. Budget allocations were also skewed in favour of the INGO and its headquarters at the expense of the NNGO. The NNGO then raised these issues directly with the donor who after investigating, decided to fund the NNGO directly instead.

Source: NNGO Forum, Pre-meeting with NNGO/INGO Representatives, Narrative Report, 20 April 2012. (There was no opportunity to get the views of the INGO and donor concerned.)

Jointly developing and monitoring principles of engagement, as the stakeholders of the Nuba Mountains Programme Advancing Conflict Transformation (NMPACT) did in the Nuba Mountains, can help to increase transparency and avoid such problems. Experience from NMPACT, a phased, multi-agency, cross–conflict program (2002-2005) suggests that developing principles of engagement provides an ethical framework to enable these issues to be taken into account. Ensuring that principles are jointly developed, clearly written and communicated to all stakeholders involved, as well as periodically reviewed and adapted, is extremely important.

Box 6: Applying Principles of Engagement – NMPACT Project

1. All interventions must be part of a single, integrated conflict transformation programme.
5. Ensure protection of human rights and sources of livelihoods.
6. Be flexible – allow responsiveness to changing conditions.
7. Implementing agencies having secure and unimpeded access to all areas in Nuba.

Source: Pantuliano, S. (2012) INGOs/LNGOs relations in South Sudan, powerpoint presentation delivered at PSO meeting on roles and responsibilities in the aid structure of South Sudan, 28th February 2012, Juba Bridge Hotel.

The implementation of agreed principles should be monitored and partners should periodically reflect on and adapt them as the partnership evolves and/or the context changes. This type of approach can foster greater accountability between partners, helping them to avoid misunderstandings and confrontations which can undermine relationships. Donors should encourage those they fund to take this approach, building in time and resources to allow for reflection and adjustment so this does not become a box-ticking exercise.
The need to build relationships and trust as the foundation for effective partnerships also came through clearly in the ZOA and IPCS learning history. ZOA and IPCS staff realised that they need to spend more time socializing or engaging informally. Getting to know each other helps build relationships founded on trust, openness and transparency (good two-way communication) and can lead to other forms of partnership or partnership which focuses on new areas.

**Box 7: Building trust through informal engagement**

‘Our relationship is multi-layered and experienced differently at different levels. We need more informal levels to build it and more social time to build the relations….it is very important that on a personal level people click’. (Representative of ZOA, Learning History interview).

‘Maybe we should organise joint events. I would want this to happen beyond the lifespan of the project. That even though we are not doing a project together, we can still have staff come over and help out with, for example, an IT problem….We should also meet in other places just for a drink.’

(Representative of IPCS, Learning History interview.)

_Source: ZOA and IPCS Learning History, April 2012._
While regular meetings between individual representatives are necessary to enable relationships and trust to be built, the timing, frequency and pace must be set by the actors themselves. *Pushing to accelerate or widen the process, injecting too much funding prematurely, or defining ‘themes’ around which funding might be provided* – as has been suggested by the JDT civil society fund scoping mission, *can reduce ownership by the civil society actors involved and result in fragmentation*. Incorporating the ‘do no harm’ principle into the wider principles of engagement is one way to address this issue. Reflecting on potential partnerships and capacity development approaches through a ‘do no harm’ lens can help stakeholders avoid the above pitfalls.

**Box 8: Supporting local government through better collaboration amongst external actors**

SNV’s action research focused on leveraging better collaboration and synergies amongst a wide range of non–State actors (donors, INGOs, local NGOs, and State ministries) in 8 counties in Eastern Equatoria State with the objective of supporting the government to implement development programmes more efficiently and effectively.

The process involved:
- Identifying and mapping coordination policy environment/instruments and key actors within the coordination space
- Collecting critical programme information on key actors by payam/county on county programme strategies, sector/thematic focus; on-going collaborative initiatives
- Use of GIS locations for visualisation
- Analysis of data collected – early May 2012
- Partners reflection workshop – mid–May 2012

Although the action research is not yet complete, SNV has already made substantial progress against its objectives. Importantly, government buy–in to the process – important for ensuring ownership and sustaining improvements in coordination – was secured from the governor as well as from the various State ministries and county departments involved. This is particularly significant because at the beginning of the year the governor reportedly said ‘we have no idea what you [INGOs] are doing’. The Directorate of Extension in the State Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry is now leading in the coordination of NGO efforts to support smallholders and thematic coordination is organised through the agricultural extension system which includes farmers’ groups and extension workers. Secondary data has been collected at the Juba level and data collection on farmer cropping preferences and preferred learning approaches by NGO partners is ongoing in three counties.

SNV has discovered that while the majority of stakeholders are enthusiastic about the process and keen to engage in effective coordination (some existing coordination initiatives are not operational while others need streamlining), securing partner participation is time consuming.

*Source: SNV Presentation at 26 April Joint Reflection meeting in Juba and SNV TLP Document.*
SNV’s action research focuses on improving collaboration and synergies amongst external actors to support the government in Eastern Equatoria to implement development programmes more efficiently and effectively. This approach is designed to minimize duplication and increase synergies between the programmes of external actors and reduce the government’s transaction costs by removing the need for them to engage with multiple actors and approaches. This creates an enabling environment for government to perform its duties more effectively.

Learning from the ZOA and IPCS action research indicates that *capacity building of local government and strengthening of local structures to increase ownership and sustainability are important components of community development. Strengthening local civil society goes hand in hand with strengthening local government structures and should not be regarded as separate policy issues.* “In our last meeting the steering committee recommended that ZOA should increase the number of hand tractors. We are aware that organizations will not stay forever and that government has to takeover. So the training of extension workers is very important. When government then comes in they will be the bridge. Hopefully by then the government will be able to provide the big tractors.”

Donors should broaden the scope of civil society funding to include local government and the strengthening of local structures. Not only will this increase ownership, sustainability and help local government to become more effective, but could also improve the quality of its engagement with civil society.

How can INGOs and NNGOs institutionalise learning attitudes, approaches and practices? Why is this particularly important in a fragile context like South Sudan?

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* Member of the Steering Committee / Local government representative to the project, ZOA and IPCS Learning History, April 2012.
The lessons learned from the TLP and related discussion support the importance of capacity development that is rooted in action learning and action research. ‘The answer to capacity development needs is not training, but action learning to really learn and develop skills. People do not learn in a class room they learn by doing, and being mentored by experienced national or international colleagues’. ‘The iterative nature of the Thematic Learning Programme approach is particularly well-suited to fragile and fast-changing contexts such as South Sudan. In addition, the TLP process itself – which uses collective research questions to trigger organisational change, solicits and engages various perspectives, encourages and makes time for joint reflection on actual experience, and turns learning and reflection into action at policy as well as the local level – enables trust-building and openness between participants which can help dispel prevailing mistrust.

Box 9: ZOA and IPCS Action Research

ZOA and IPCS conducted a learning history, including field work. Two consultants, one journalist and one facilitator interviewed ZOA and IPCS staff and conducted focus group discussions in the field with farmers’ groups, the program steering committee, youth and women’s groups. “From the debriefing we have already learned that there are some misunderstandings in the relationship of ZOA with local authorities. We will reflect on findings, and will relate it to action. We do not want to be blaming but find out what are the root causes of some of the negative feelings. The report will be presented to the community”.

ZOA and IPCS have developed an Action Plan based on the lessons from the learning history. This includes holding ‘reflection’ sessions together to discuss feedback and insights from the learning history as well as with communities and other stakeholders to address issues arising from the report. One point on which they want to take immediate action is on lobbying for the inclusion of local government as a target group for projects and capacity development. ZOA and IPCS are both keen to use action research in the development of other partnerships.

Source: ZOA and IPCS Presentation on Learning History at 26 April meeting.

9 PSO interview with Giovanni Bosco, UN Head of OCHA, Juba, 24 April 2012.
5. The way forward

Several Juba-based donors interviewed in the course of the TLP so far have indicated that despite the obvious need for a strong and resilient civil society they are unlikely to provide significant and longer-term resources for this important area of work. ‘Now is not the right time,’ they said. This is largely because they think civil society development is a separate, risky and ill-defined ‘sector’ – a lower priority than meeting growing humanitarian needs. This is a false dichotomy, however. It is far riskier not to prioritise capacity development for civil society during humanitarian crises.

‘The combination of an effective state and active civil society is too often absent in countries vulnerable to crises. Meeting the challenge to build both is essential for effective emergency response and for increasing communities’ resilience to disasters, violence, and other shocks.’ Over time, effective capacity development of civil society organizations can help build stronger and more resilient communities able to respond to whatever shocks and crises come their way. ‘There are lots of reasons why capacity development of local civil society actors makes sense: for example because of security issues and tribal rivalry. Since INGOs are not present in the field they have difficulties understanding and dealing with these issues. To be able to save lives we will have to invest in the role of (local) CSOs in service delivery for the next few years. Further, civil society will need to play a role in the building of a democratic approaches and peace building.’

When is it the ‘right time’ to support the development of civil society? Based on the learning from the TLP, we argue that that time is now. A stronger and more resilient civil society will be better able to weather the impact of drought, budget cuts and escalating conflict and to hold both its government and international actors to account. Lessons from the action learning program suggest that donors should adopt the following principles and support strategies:

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11 PSO interview with Giovanni Bosco, UN Head of OCHA, Juba, 24 April 2012.
**Principles**

- **Acknowledge that different actors have different views on what the role(s) of civil society are or should be in South Sudan.** Therefore, it is important that stakeholders – including donors, government, UN, INGOs and civil society actors themselves – understand the wide range of roles civil society can play at different times and in different circumstances and support them.

- **Avoid trying to create a civil society in South Sudan in their own image** by imposing thematic boundaries or other prescriptive approaches.

- **Recognise that while some CBOs and NNGOs lack capacities related to project planning, implementation, monitoring and reporting, not all do.** In addition, many of these local and national organisations have important knowledge and capacities that INGO partners lack such as a detailed understanding of the local society and context, including conflict and power dynamics.

- **Broaden the scope of civil society funding to include local government and the strengthening of local structures.** Not only will this increase ownership, sustainability and help local government to become more effective, but could also improve the quality of its engagement with civil society.

- **Be aware that in the fragile context of South Sudan, external pressure to accelerate or widen the civil society building process, injecting too much funding prematurely, or defining ‘themes’ around which funding might be provided can reduce ownership by the civil society actors involved and result in fragmentation.** Using a ‘do no harm’ approach may help to avoid these types of negative unintended outcomes.

**Support Strategies**

- **Provide longer-term funding for civil society capacity development.** Experience shows that effective capacity development requires long-term funding and sustained engagement between partners.

- **Give local civil society actors time to come together and decide on their own agendas.**

- **Ensure INGOs improve transparency in partnerships with local partners** by requiring them to involve partners at every stage of the design phase, ensuring the budget allocation process is fair and transparent, and preparing and sharing with them donor reports and donor feedback on these. When possible, establish direct links with NNGOs.

- **Fund INGOs to nurture and further develop the capacity and skills of experienced NNGOs** and the resource persons within them to help build capacity of less experienced and able CSOs and NNGOs.

- **Hold partners to account for jointly developing and monitoring adherence to principles of engagement.** Insist the principles are periodically reviewed and adapted in line with changes in context to avoid this becoming another box-ticking exercise.

- **Support capacity development that is rooted in action research and action learning** investing in joint reflection on actual experience, and turning learning and reflection into action at policy as well as the local level. The process will help to build more open and trusting relationships between participants which can in turn creates an enabling environment for effective capacity development. Employing action research and learning methodologies will also help to ensure that actors continuously assess the context and the results of their actions which is particularly important in dynamic and complex environments like South Sudan.
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