



Civil Society Engagement Framework

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Submission to AusAID

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CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) is the independent peak council for Australian NGOs working in the field of international aid and development. ACFID welcomes the initiative to develop a 'Civil Society Engagement Framework' (hereon 'the Framework').

ACFID believes there are a number of core principles that should inform the development of the Framework:

1. ACFID recommends that the Framework would be strengthened if the approach is broadened from a focus on *how AusAID proposes to engage with civil society in Australia* to reflect on *how AusAID, and preferably the Australian Government, engage with civil society organisations wherever they may be, including Australian NGOs, with the aim of delivering the most effective aid and development program.*
2. A Framework of principles would be best designed between AusAID and civil society via mutual collaboration, with civil society in Australia initially and later in country, in their development. The principles would then apply to all interactions between AusAID and civil society and therefore commitments arising from such a Framework could apply to all stakeholders. The ACFID AusAID partnership agreement is an example of this possibility.
3. ACFID strongly recommends that the Framework be grounded in norms of accountability which will be the test of its usefulness. We suggest that such norms are cover the following:
 - a) an organisation-wide commitment to engage civil society stakeholders in activities and decision-making.
 - b) Utilising organisation-wide policies, systems and processes that underpin good practice would facilitate the implementation of such a commitment.
 - c) institutionalised spaces for discussion with CS should be created over time where external stakeholders can regularly contribute to decision-making at the governing, executive and/ or senior management levels, both at Post and in Canberra.
 - d) Positive compliance mechanisms to ensure that commitments arising from the Framework are implemented consistently, ie some formal checks, backed up and monitoring and evaluation
5. To facilitate achievement of these domains, ACFID suggests that all (mutual) principles included in the Framework should be clearly stated and then linked to:
 - a) an explanation of mutual obligations arising from principles;
 - b) guidance on how to achieve obligations based on existing or best practice; and
 - c) assurance measures set out to allow for meaningful monitoring and evaluation of the principles.

For example, the proposed principles of 'inclusiveness' set out the following:

Support open communication and trusting relationships

Recognise the important role of advocacy by civil society

Involve beneficiaries to the maximum extent possible in design, implementation and evaluation

Promote an approach that seeks to include all people in a community and ensures the most vulnerable have equal access to, and benefit from, international development assistance

Do not exclude people based on religion, politics, gender, disability or ethnicity

Enhance gender equality

Be culturally appropriate and accessible

Respect and foster universally agreed human rights

Indicative obligations arising from this principle:

AusAID commits to regular dialogue with civil society in Australia and in country via established dialogue mechanisms around thematic and country issues, including at a senior executive level where required

AusAID commits to joint agenda setting of such meetings

AusAID commits to a working schedule of proposed meetings during the course of a year with civil society in advance, and this schedule is made widely available

AusAID commits to informing civil society about planned consultations as far in advance as possible and allows sufficient time for civil society to incorporate such consultations and dialogue into work plans and workloads

AusAID commits to being inclusive in regards to participation

AusAID commits to making key documents available in major spoken languages when operating in country

AusAID commits to locating disability accessible meeting places in Australia and in country

Guidance

This section would set out examples for AusAID staff based on existing practice of AusAID with civil society. Eg learnings from development of policy on disability

Assurance

AusAID and civil society assess implementation of the principles by evaluating the process

Number of consultation and dialogues held each year against a base line in Australia and in country

Number of (translated) documents provided in advance for consultations in country

Number of disability accessible venues located, and number of disabled participants participating

Number of female representatives participating in meetings in Australia and in country

Number of senior executives from AusAID attending consultations (and if this was to be extended to a joint body of principles with NGOs, then number of senior NGO staff attending).

a. How will we know if the Framework is successful?

Currently, the relationship between Australian NGOs and other civil society organisations and the Australian Government in undertaking joint aid and development initiatives is too dependent on the current good relations and understandings between individuals. The Framework should contribute to institutionalising the partnership approach between the government and civil society.

Secondly, this Framework could assist with widening the understanding within the Australian Government of the various roles and functions civil society plays in aid and development, and be expanded to be a whole-of-government Framework in regards to engaging CSOs. This enhanced understanding should also contribute to achieving a more equitable partnership between our sector and AusAID, or the Australian Government.

Ultimately the benefit of a institutionalized relationship, and more equitable partnership, should be more productive ways of working, which should lead to greater collaboration and impact in aid and development activities ie greater alleviation of poverty, greater respect for human rights, etc.

2. Defining 'civil society'

Recent years have seen much discussion of just what constitutes 'civil society'. A number of definitions have been suggested. ACFID considers the following, which is the working definition of the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), useful:

- The formal and informal organisations and associations that operate in the space between the family and the state. These organisations are not controlled or owned by the state, and primarily operate on a not-for-profit base.
- An arena for civil society actors and their relationships with other actors like the state and the private sector. This space and arena will be shaped by its surroundings, including the legal framework under which a civil society operates. (NORAD website)¹

The London School of Economics' Centre for Civil Society's working definition better recognises the ambiguities involved:

*Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.*²

A famous and now standard theoretical framework of CSOs working in the field of aid and development is Korten's generational model of NGOs.³ First generation approaches respond to immediate needs and are not overly participatory; second generation approaches are community development models based on partnership, empowerment, and participation. Third generation approaches arose from a recognition that a myriad of

¹ www.norad.no/en

² <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/>

³ David C Korten (1990) *Getting to the 21st Century – voluntary action and the global agenda.*

second generation community development initiatives were not tackling the underlying systems that perpetuate poverty, injustice and violations of rights, and so policy and advocacy responses were required.

Korten proposed a fourth generation in the 1990s which was premised on the success of social movements for decolonisation, advancing women’s rights, environmental rights and anti racism, which are broad networks of social change and involve CSOs making a conscious decision to align and collapse their functions into a larger movements of positive social advancement.

Although sharing the same limits as most linear models, it is useful to try to capture the nature of CSOs that AusAID may try to encompass in its Framework through the inclusion of a definition. However, the reality is that many CSOs blur, or span a range of generational approaches, and AusAID’s Framework will need to allow for Australian as well as southern CSOs that will want to engage in a range of capacities, sometimes adopting multiple generational approaches simultaneously.

Korten’s Strategies of Development-oriented NGOs: Four Generations			
<i>First</i>	<i>Second</i>	<i>Third</i>	<i>Fourth</i>
Relief and Welfare	Community Development	Sustainable systems development	People’s Movements

According to ACFID, CSOs can be described to include all voluntary non-market and non-state organisations in which people organise themselves and share a common defining identity – that they are principle based, aiming for the betterment of society, focused on the people in society they serve or represent. They cover a wide range of organisations that include membership-based CSOs, cause-based CSOs, and service-oriented CSOs. CSOs promote people’s participation and democratic action and reflect the values of socio-economic justice and solidarity as global citizens.⁴

To add to this description, ACFID recognises that CSOs are highly diverse expressions of active citizenship in their society and that they are development actors in their own right (please refer to our response to the previous question of the consultation paper).

Examples include community-based organisations and village associations, environmental groups, women’s rights groups, farmers’ associations, faith-based organisations, labour unions, cooperatives, professional associations, chambers of commerce, independent research institutes, and the not-for-profit media.⁵

⁴ Tomlinson, Reality Check, August 2008.

⁵ Based on: World Bank, ‘Advisory Group Synthesis of Findings and Recommendations’, August 2008 and ‘A Synthesis of Advisory Group Regional Consultations and Related Processes’, January 2008.

3. Interactions between the aid program and civil society

The consultation paper highlights three main areas of interaction between the aid program and civil society:

- Policy dialogue
- Program Delivery
- Building Community Support

ACFID agrees with these areas of interaction, however added to this there should be greater cooperation with CSOs to garner community understanding of Australian-funded programs and elicit greater input into program design, implementation, and evaluation.

There is a relatively small group of development professionals in Australia spanning government departments, NGOs, Australian managing contractors and academics. It is imperative to inform each other and work more closely together as the power to learn and share experience about what works is vital. There is an opportunity for greater policy dialogue and learning about program delivery at the Post level with CSOs in the field.

Given the complexities of development, the starting point for a Framework for engagement with CSOs should be that policymakers cannot have all the solutions to operate in such complex environments. Policy and program solutions are going to arise from widespread public and CSO dialogue, as well as engagement with the private sector. Compartmentalisation needs to be broken down and participatory processes designed so as to develop the best Australian policy and program interventions possible ensuring sustainability.

a. Are there ways we can create more coherent links?

The Framework should set out the vision for how collaborative policy and program development initiatives will operate. The Framework requires an effective vision and engagement strategy, and genuinely extend goodwill to CSOs in Australia and the south. Articulating this collaborative context in developing countries in particular, can help alleviate CSO confusion and misdirection and increase the likelihood for a more constructive and high-quality outcome.

Traditional policy consultation typically defines how the public can engage by specifying a narrow window of participation: 'please comment on this proposal'. This kind of narrow invitation results, not surprisingly, in a string of (sometimes limited) comments. While this outcome is easily tracked and reported, it allows little genuine dialogue between participants and the consulting organisation.

'Guidelines for participation' should set out principles and recommendations for all participants regarding their contributions and interaction with other community members. In developing countries, they should be hosted in a prominent location and communicate:

- the social norms of the community in regards to consultation;
- the ideal quality of contributions;
- the behaviour expected by all participants (which must include the host);
and
- the participation methods that accommodate different levels and areas of interest and allow for different energy/time investment.

4. What are the most effective ways for AusAID to work with civil society in support of the government's development objectives and those of our partner country governments?

Firstly, for effective ways of cooperation and collaboration there must be recognition by all parties of the independence and distinctive characters and roles of each party.

Secondly, there should be a focus on mutual accountability with communities we serve ensuring they are more prominent voice in all development work that affects them including all planning, monitoring and evaluation efforts.

Thirdly, there should be mutual responsibility for demonstrating development effectiveness which can be ideally judged by recipient communities.

It should be possible to establish more consultative mechanisms to engage communities and the public in countries receiving Australian ODA, working with CSOs where they exist to facilitate such popular input.

a. What are the key comparative advantages of civil society that the government should draw on in delivering development assistance?

The important role CSOs play in international cooperation, aid and development has long been acknowledged but not well-articulated and recognised in international discussions and processes.⁶ Some of the roles of CSOs include:

- to mobilise grassroots communities, poor and marginalised people;
- to monitor government and donor policies and practices;
- to deliver services and development programming;
- to build coalitions and networks for greater civil society coordination and impact;
- to promote global citizenship and public engagement in the north;
- to mobilise and leverage northern resources.

As stakeholders in international development, as aid recipients for development activities and also, in some instances, as donors themselves, civil society organisations (CSOs) play a very important part in the international aid architecture. Significant aid resources are managed by CSOs – this is estimated at A\$33 billion annually.⁷ ACFID's members alone jointly expended \$1.063 billion in 2007/08.⁸

ACFID however, argues that civil societies' place in the aid architecture arises not solely from our role as donors or aid recipients, but from a variety of socio-economic roles in development which emphasise partnership, listening to communities, and adjusting approaches as a result, and experience derived from adherence to principles such as human rights, social justice, and technical principles like SPHERE etc. Practice experience can range from mobilising grassroots communities to monitoring government policy and

⁶ Despite the volume of the resources managed by CSOs, the role and importance of CSOs as development actors in their own right, alongside donors and governments, has only recently been formally recognised by international donors and governments at the 2008 Accra High-Level Forum.

⁷ Advisory Group on Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness: Synthesis of Findings and Recommendations, August 2008, page 9. The estimate is US\$30 billion (converted to A\$ on 20 November 2009)

⁸ ACFID Statistical Survey, 2007/08.

practice; from delivering services and programs to educating the public and helping to shape social values of solidarity and social justice.

Civil society organisations have a crucial role in the development process as innovative agents of change and social transformation. As people's organisations they are well situated in many cases to understand the needs and claims of ordinary people and build multiple relationships with communities who are the agents of development efforts..

CSOs are diverse and critical by nature. They play multiple roles in development, as watchdogs, service providers, mobilisers, research institutions etc. Given this, all stakeholders – donors, multilateral organisations, developing country governments, CSOs and communities – have a stake in assuring that CSOs realise their full potential.⁹ Ensuring AusAID's greater consultation and engagement and collaboration with CSOs helps support a the breadth and diversity of democratic CSOs. Globally, CSOs have acknowledged their obligation to take forward and lead a process to improve their own effectiveness as development actors.

5. Are current consultation mechanisms adequate for providing civil society stakeholders opportunities to influence Australian aid policy and programming?

ACFID is pleased to highlight the Partnership Agreement between AusAID and ACFID, which was agreed to on 24 March 2009, here. The Partnership specifically seeks to strengthen cooperation between AusAID and ACFID as well as cooperation between other federal agencies engaged in development-related work and the NGO sector as represented by ACFID.

The Partnership Agreement was developed mutually over a period of about 12 months, between representatives from AusAID and ACFID. The Agreement has led to a stronger dialogue, increased understanding and a broadening of the range of stakeholders within AusAID beyond the dedicated NGO and community engagement sector.

ACFID is interested in exploring the possibility of explicitly applying the shared development principles included in the AusAID/ACFID Partnership Agreement to the whole civil society sector engaged in development-related work.¹⁰ Recently, there have been some strong examples of consultation and dialogue between government and civil society stakeholders, for example the Inclusive Disability Strategy, and this is a model for the future.

Generally, civil society organisations need a longer time frame to prepare for consultations and to provide relevant input. Agencies with a small staff (the majority), and even those with larger numbers of staff, work to existing work plans which means rescheduling current commitments and priorities if they are to prepare and convene for AusAID meetings called with short notice. In addition, often the short notice of consultations precludes more senior or field based staff participating, which can diminish the relevance of the input provided.

In order to improve the consultation mechanism, ACFID wishes to refer to the Compact Code of Good Practice on Consultation and Policy Appraisal developed by the UK

⁹ Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness, Progress Report (July 2008)

¹⁰ The shared development principles included in the AusAID and ACFID Partnership Agreement are: international best practice, development effectiveness, reducing poverty, building capacity, sustainability, gender, disability inclusive, participation and good governance and involving the Australian community.

Government.¹¹ This document lists a number of key requirements for effective consultation:

- Consultation at an early stage of policy, framework or strategy development. Consultation must be built into the regular planning cycle;

If consultation with NGOs is considered as an initial step in the development process of a new policy, framework or strategy, the views and insights offered can make a more effective contribution, achieving the full potential of a consultative method.

- Consultees need to be given sufficient time to respond and be given a clear understanding about the purpose of the consultation;

The possibility of achieving the full potential of a consultative method is further strengthened if sufficient response time is allowed, as this will strongly increase the likelihood of the most relevant members of civil society being available to turn their attention to the issue at hand.

- It should be explained where decisions have already been made, it should be made clear what can and can't be changed;

Mutual respect and understanding between consulting parties is strengthened by transparency on decisions made. ACFID and her members respect that government processes bring certain requirements and limitations.

- Various methods of consultation could be utilised;

As NGOs working in aid and development are based in the field, ways of consultation in the field such as preliminary briefings on the area of concern, followed by facilitated forums are important to augment Australian based consultations. AusAID supporting video conferencing and telecons to include field staff, CS reps in country and Australian based CS would be fruitful.

- Report back on the views that were received and what has been done as a result;

A stronger focus on informing those consulted about the process and content decisions will enhance transparency and thus the validity of the final document.

- Evaluate after consulting and learn lessons for next time.

ACFID feels that it is very important to learn lessons from consultation experiences to further strengthen the practice for all consulting parties. The joint AusAID/NGO Committee for Development Cooperation (CDC) could reflect upon learning and make recommendations for improvements to both NGO players and AusAID.

¹¹ UK Compact, Consultation and Policy Appraisal Compact Code of Good Practice, original publication date: May 2000, reprinted: May 2008. Accessible via: www.thecomcompact.org.uk, last accessed on 14.01.10

6. Are these suitable principles for AusAID's Civil Society Framework? Are there others?

ACFID feels strongly that the principles should be shared principles if they are to be effectively implemented, and thus that these should be developed through a process that reaches consensus with civil society organisations in Australia and overseas.

An important principle that is currently not included in the consultation paper is the independence of civil society organisations from government. Respect for independence is key to achieving good working relations and will encourage the expression of views. Independence of civil society organisations, including the right to comment on government policy and advocate for policy change, should be specifically acknowledged in the Framework as a core principle.

Besides listing principles, further discussion should be had to explore what these principles entail for both AusAID and the government and civil society organisations. At the moment understanding of the proposed principles is assumed not shared.

In regards to accountability to communities and CSOs in developing countries, there need to be greater systems for ensuring community awareness of Australian aid contributions to development programs affecting (or not) their lives; and this should be linked to greater accountability mechanisms being put in place to ensure communities and CSOs can raise concerns about Australian funded aid and development initiatives. Such mechanisms should not be seen as creating embarrassment, but rather potential for learning and improvement. An important part of committing to such mechanisms is taking partner governments along with the Australian Government in developing feedback loops that allow CSO and community input, and development of the ability to provide feedback to complainants on whether their concerns are being, or can be, addressed.

For example, currently AusAID has a policy for a complaints process for procurement, but not apparently for beneficiaries of Australia funded aid and development programs with governments, multilaterals or CSOs.

The Framework should set out whether AusAID will make a commitment to having transparent and readily accessible mechanisms for taking on board CSO suggestions and/or concerns, particularly for CSOs linked to communities in developing countries, and underpinned by good practice principles that guide their practices in the area; and whether AusAID will develop the systems to ensure these commitments are brought into practice.

Finally, the Framework could be grounded in international aid architecture in referencing major agreements such as ACCRA. For example, the pre-existing commitment made by the Australian Government in 2000 at the UN Millennium Summit when it signed the Millennium Declaration undertaking *"To develop strong partnerships with the private sector and with civil society organizations in pursuit of development and poverty eradication."*¹²

¹² General Assembly resolution 55/2 of 8 September 2000, at: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/millennium.htm>, last accessed on 14.01.10. Similarly, paragraph 20 of the Accra Agenda for Action (AAA) clearly recognises civil society as development actors in their own right that complement efforts by donors and governments. The AAA acknowledges that donors and governments "share an interest in ensuring that CSO contributions to development reach their full potential". Donors and governments in the AAA "invite CSOs to reflect on how they can apply the Paris principles of aid effectiveness *from a CSO perspective* [emphasis added]". They "welcome the

7. Are AusAID’s current monitoring frameworks capturing the right information with regards to the effectiveness of civil society programs?

The AusAID/ACFID Partnership Agreement proposed a “strong focus on the evaluation of program effectiveness, particularly from the perspective of partners and beneficiaries”; and to review the Agreement on an annual basis and at other times as mutually agreed. Based on the principles above, ACFID proposes that both a qualitative and quantitative approach be taken to monitoring and evaluating the implementation and development of the Agreement over time.

A suitable methodology for evaluation to help capture the development of the partnership relationship is the Most Significant Change (MSC) approach, which is becoming more common in development practice. MSC doesn’t replace other methods of monitoring and evaluation – in fact it works well in conjunction with methods like content analysis and quantitative analysis – but it comes into its own where outcomes are unexpected and meanings are disputed. Indicators just don’t help us to see what has changed in these situations.

Four types of possible outcomes:	expected outcome	unexpected outcome
outcome with an agreed meaning	1. Indicators useful here	2. Indicators unlikely to be developed here
outcome with a disputed meaning	3. Indicators might be developed here	4. Indicators cannot be used here

MSC is based on telling stories about events people think were important – there is no need to explain what an indicator is or learn special professional skills. So everyone can. Project stakeholders are involved both in deciding the sorts of change to be recorded and in analysing the data.

MSC occurs throughout the program cycle and provides information to help **monitor** and manage a program. MSC is particularly suited to monitoring a program where the focus is on learning rather than just accountability.

MSC provides data on impact and outcomes that can be used to **evaluate** the performance of the programs a whole. MSC can identify unexpected changes to deliver a rich picture of what is happening even when there are complex and diverse outcomes.

CSOs’ proposal to engage with them in a CSO-led multi-stakeholder process to promote CSO development effectiveness”. They go on to point to several issues that they hope this CSO-led process will address: i) improved coordination of CSO efforts with government programs; ii) enhanced CSO accountability for results; and iii) improved information on CSO activities.

The Most Significant Change process

The MSC process involves the collection of stories from staff and beneficiaries who are directly involved in a relationship or program. The stories are then analysed, discussed and verified.

Before the stories are collected, a group of stakeholders decides what will be monitored – the ‘domains’ – such as ‘changes in people’s ways of working’. The domains are deliberately left loose so the actual users can define what they mean to them.

Simple questions help participants decide what to write about. For example: ‘During the last month, in your opinion, what was the most significant change for participants in the program’. Participants are encouraged to say why they consider a particular change to be the most significant one and to say which domain it belongs in.

A panel of stakeholders or/and staff select the most significant stories – they systematically look for project impact. Various people sit down together and read the selected stories aloud and discuss the value of the reported changes. When the technique is implemented successfully, whole teams of people begin to focus their attention on program impact.

One of the key stages of MSC is the selection of the domains. It is always a strategic decision about what to measure and why – this is no different when using MSC. However the MSC domains offer a lot of flexibility: a domain for negative changes can be included to counteract bias towards positive stories; or an ‘open window’ domain – what else has changed? – can be included. The domains can even be left to emerge during the story selection process.

However, if extra domains are used, more stories will be generated and more time will be needed for discussion, negotiation and filtering

As the stories filter up a hierarchy, the feedback from different levels of authority about how stories are selected informs participants about how their work is understood and valued.

a. How could AusAID and civil society organisations work together to improve their monitoring and evaluation systems?

Australian aid and development NGOs understand the need for AusAID to maintain the sort of monitoring and evaluation system that will provide some feedback on the impact of aid programming through NGOs as well as data necessary to mitigate issues of risk that remain beyond the accreditation process.

The sector however, feels strongly that the main focus for assessing the effectiveness of civil society programs must be on learning. Regular joint learning events, a conference or a series of thematic seminars as well as peer reviews are considered very effective ways of drawing out lessons.