



## Partners or donors?

### Norwegian organisations and civil society in developing countries

#### EVALUATION OVERVIEW

This evaluation brief draws on the evaluation of Norwegian support to strengthen civil society in developing countries through Norwegian civil society organisations (report 1/2018). This support is provided through the Civil Society Grant administered by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad).

**Purpose of the Evaluation:** The purpose of the evaluation is to provide Norad and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs with information that can be used to improve future efforts to strengthening civil society in developing countries

**Methodology:** Literature survey, document reviews, semi structured interviews with Norwegian civil society organisations and local partners, focus group discussions, on-line survey among Norwegian civil society organisations and field studies in Ethiopia, Nepal and Uganda.

**Evaluation Team:** Elling N. Tjønneland, (team leader), Svein-Erik Helle, Stein-Erik Kruse, Ingela Ternström, Bjørn Ternström, Yeraswork Admassie, Kanta Singh, Elizabeth Bamwine, Espen Villanger.

**Commissioned by:** The Evaluation Department in the Norwegian Agency for development cooperation (Norad)

This brief was written by Elling N. Tjønneland

What role do Norwegian organisations play in supporting civil society in developing countries? Do they add value to the support beyond transferring financial assistance? Has the support led to a more viable and sustainable civil society? These are some of the key questions addressed in a 2017 evaluation commissioned by the Evaluation Department in Norad.

Norwegian civil society organisations play an important role as a channel for Norwegian development aid. Currently, more than 20% of the aid budget is channelled through Norwegian organisations. In some countries, aid channelled through Norwegian civil society organisations accounts for half or more of Norwegian aid. Norwegian organisations are also virtually the only channel for disbursement from the Norad civil society grant – the main Norwegian funding mechanism for long-term support for strengthening of civil society and democratisation in developing countries and is the focus for this evaluation.

## ABOUT THE NORWEGIAN CIVIL SOCIETY GRANT

The Norwegian Civil Society Grant is administered by Norad. Since 2006, this grant has amounted to about 5% of total Norwegian aid annually. The main objective of the grant is to contribute to a stronger civil society in developing countries with the ability and capacity to promote democratisation, realisation of human rights and poverty reduction.

The evaluation gives credit to the work done by Norwegian civil society organisation and their partners to strengthen civil society in developing countries. Projects progress well – activities are implemented, outputs are delivered and short-term objectives are largely achieved.

However, the evaluation also finds that effectiveness in relation to civil society strengthening is currently not optimal. There are areas for improvement. This brief will focus on two of these areas: Sustainability of the support and the value added of providing civil society support through Norwegian organisations.

### DO NORWEGIAN ORGANISATIONS BRING AN ADDED VALUE?

What value do the Norwegian organisations bring to their local partners beyond the financial support? Some Norwegian organisations have an instrumental approach and search for partners that can implement Norwegian policy objectives and projects. For other Norwegian organisations, strengthening their local partner is a main objective. Most Norwegian organisations place themselves somewhere along a continuum between these two positions. Different approaches reflect the diversity of Norwegian organisations. However, it also reflects that the Norad civil society grant makes funds available for a variety of purposes and activities under the broad heading “civil society strengthening”. This has led to an increasing emphasis on Norwegian thematic priority areas such as education with Norwegian organisations seeking to ensure that local partners deliver results.

In general, the evaluation found that Norwegian civil society organisations are perceived by most local partners as friendly, flexible and predictable with long-term commitment. They often compare favourably with many other Northern and international NGOs.

However, the evaluation found few examples of Norwegian organisations documenting the value added of their

role in civil society strengthening. Nor did we find much emphasis on preparing and planning for such value addition. The evaluation assessed value addition along three dimensions:

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

The different partnership approaches identified have different strengths and weaknesses in relation to value addition. Major Norwegian organisations working through country offices or international organisations may be in a position to reach more people and provide professional support in delivery of services. However, the evaluation also found important value addition from smaller Norwegian organisations operating from Norway establishing direct relations with likeminded local organisations.

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

**The Evaluation Department**, located in Norad, initiates evaluations of activities financed over the Norwegian aid budget. The Department is governed under a specific mandate and reports directly to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The evaluations are carried out by independent evaluators, and all evaluation reports are made public.

January 2018  
ISBN: 978-82-8369-050-7  
Cover photo: Gunnar Zachrisen

**Norad**

Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation  
[www.norad.no](http://www.norad.no)  
[post-eval@norad.no](mailto:post-eval@norad.no)

### **HOW SUSTAINABLE IS THE SUPPORT?**

A large part of civil society in developing countries – especially in low-income countries – are dependent on foreign funding for their programmes and projects. This also applies to most local civil society organisations supported by Norwegian organisations. The “donor” dimension of the partnership remains crucial.

The evaluation found that many partnerships between Norwegian organisations and local partners have lasted for a very long-time, in some cases for decades. The continued dependence on foreign funding has contributed to increased dependence by forcing many local partners to adapt their activities to donor priorities – which could in turn reduce ownership and disconnect them from their grassroots foundations.

However, the evaluation also found many examples of how the Norwegian organisations have helped to grow and strengthen their partners to become less dependent on Norwegian funds and also – in a few cases – to enable a stronger focus on other dimensions than fundraising. Reduced financial dependence has primarily been achieved through strengthening the capacity to raise funds from other northern organisations and donor agencies. The evaluation also noted that local partners visited had systems and procedures, skills and experience to continue without a Norwegian partner. They were however dependent upon foreign funding to maintain its programmes – on which many depend on in order to retain staff.

### **TOWARDS A MORE EFFECTIVE CIVIL SOCIETY SUPPORT?**

In order to improve future aid to strengthening civil society in developing countries the evaluation recommends a more strategic use of the Norad civil society grant. This includes more focus on identifying the value

added of the contribution by Norwegian civil society organisations. It also calls for support mechanisms that empower and create stronger ownership among southern civil society organisations.

The whole report including findings and recommendations can be found at Norad’s website:

<https://www.norad.no/om-bistand/publikasjon/2018/from-donors-to-partners-evaluation-of-norwegian-support-to-strengthen-civil-society-in-developing-countries-through-norwegian-organisations>