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# Finland's action to strengthen civil societies and advance their enabling environment

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# Finland's action to strengthen civil societies and advance their enabling environment

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**Abstract**

The strengthening of civil societies is an important goal in Finland's development policy and a means to achieve other development policy goals. Supporting civil societies is important in the current world political situation, where civic spaces are shrinking and autocratization is on the rise. This commissioned study for the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland (MFA) examines the strengthening of civil societies and advancing their enabling environment in Finland's development policy and cooperation. It focuses on the implementation of the MFA Guidelines for Civil Society in Development Policy (2017) across Finnish development policy sectors. The study is based on document reviews and interviews. Additionally, an online participatory workshop with multi-sectoral stakeholders was organized. The results indicate that the strengthening of civil societies is perceived as very important across Finnish development policy sectors, and its emphasis has increased. Finnish development policy and cooperation supports civil societies through multiple funding instruments. However, much of this work remains invisible, and the overall perception regarding civil society support relates to the MFA support to Finnish CSOs. To respond to world political challenges, Finland should develop a more strategic and political approach in its support for civil societies and their enabling environments.

**Provision** This report is commissioned as part of UniPID Development Policy Studies (UniPID DPS), funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland (MFA) and managed by the Finnish University Partnership for International Development (UniPID). UniPID is a network of Finnish universities established to strengthen universities' global responsibility and collaboration with partners from the Global South, in support of sustainable development. The UniPID DPS instrument strengthens knowledge-based development policy by identi-fying the most suitable available researchers to respond to the timely knowledge needs of the MFA and by facilitating a framework for dialogue between researchers and ministry officials. The content of this report does not reflect the official opinion of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. The responsibility for the information and views expressed in the report lies entirely with the authors.

**Keywords** development cooperation policy, civil society, non-governmental organizations, state of civil society, democracy, authoritarianism

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# Suomen toiminta kansalaisyhteiskuntien vahvistamiseksi ja niille suotuisien toimintaympäristöjen edistämiseksi

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**Tiivistelmä**

Kansalaisyhteiskuntien vahvistaminen on tärkeä tavoite Suomen kehityspolitiikassa ja keino saavuttaa muita kehityspoliittisia tavoitteita. Kansalaisyhteiskuntien tukeminen on tärkeää nykyisessä maailmanpoliittisessa tilanteessa, jossa kansalaisyhteiskunnan tila kutistuu ja autokratisoituminen lisääntyy. Tämä ulkoministeriön (UM) tilaustutkimus tarkastelee kansalaisyhteiskuntien vahvistamista ja niille suotuisien toimintaympäristöjen edistämistä Suomen kehityspolitiikassa ja -yhteistyössä. Se keskittyy erityisesti kehityspoliittisen kansalaisyhteiskuntalinjauksen (2017) toimeenpanoon Suomen kehityspolitiikan eri sektoreilla. Tutkimus perustuu dokumenttianalyysiin ja haastatteluihin. Lisäksi järjestettiin osallistava työpaja monialaisten sidosryhmien kanssa. Tulokset osoittavat, että kansalaisyhteiskuntien vahvistaminen koetaan erittäin tärkeäksi Suomen kehityspolitiikan eri sektoreilla ja sen painoarvo on kasvanut. Suomen kehityspolitiikka ja -yhteistyö tukee kansalaisyhteiskuntia useilla erilaisilla rahoitusinstrumenteilla. Suuri osa tästä työstä on kuitenkin näkymätöntä, ja yleinen käsitys on, että kansalaisyhteiskuntien tukeminen liittyy UM:n tukeen suomalaisille kansalaisjärjestöille. Vastatakseen nykyajan maailmanpoliittisiin haasteisiin Suomen tulisi kehittää strategisempaa ja poliittisempaa lähestymistapaa kansalaisyhteiskuntien ja niille suotuisien toimintaympäristöjen tukemisessa.

**Klauusuli** Tämä raportti on osa ulkoministeriön rahoittamia ja UniPID-verkoston hallinnoimia kehityspoliittisia selvityksiä (UniPID Development Policy Studies). Finnish University Partnership for International Development, UniPID, on suomalaisten yliopistojen verkosto, joka edistää yliopistojen globaalivastuuta ja yhteistyötä globaalin etelän kumppanien kanssa kestävän kehityksen saralla. Kehityspoliittinen selvitysyhteistyö vahvistaa kehityspolitiikan tietoperustaisuutta. UniPID identifioi sopivia tutkijoita vastaamaan ulkoministeriön ajankohtaisiin tiedontarpeisiin ja fasilitoi puitteet tutkijoiden ja ministeriön virkahenkilöiden väliselle dialogille. Tämän raportin sisältö ei vastaa ulkoministeriön virallista kantaa. Vastuu raportissa esitetyistä tiedoista ja näkökulmista on raportin laatijoilla.

**Asiasanat** kehitysyhteistyöpolitiikka, kansalaisyhteiskunta, kansalaisjärjestöt, kansalaisyhteiskunnan tila, demokratia, autoritaarisuus

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# Finlands handlingsprogram för att stärka civilsamhällena och främja deras gynnsamma miljö


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**Referat**

Att stärka civilsamhällena är ett viktigt mål i Finlands utvecklingspolitik och ett medel för att uppnå andra utvecklingspolitiska mål. Att stöda civilsamhällen är viktigt i den världspolitiska situationen, där de civila ytorna krymper och autokratiseringen ökar. Den här studien som är beställd av finska utrikesministeriet (UM) undersöker stärkandet av civilsamhällen och främjandet av deras verksamhetsmiljö i Finlands utvecklingspolitik och -samarbete. Undersökningen fokuserar på genomförandet av utvecklingspolitiska riktlinjer för civilsamhällen (2017) inom de olika utvecklingspolitiska sektorerna. Studien bygger på dokumentgenomgång och intervjuer. Dessutom ordnades en online-workshop där deltagarna representerades av olika intressegrupper. Resultaten visar att stärkandet av civilsamhällena uppfattas som mycket viktigt inom de finländska utvecklingspolitiska sektorerna och tyngdpunkten dessutom har ökat. Finlands utvecklingspolitik och -samarbete stöder civilsamhällen genom olika former av finansiering. Mycket av detta arbete är ändå osynligt, eftersom uppfattningen om det civila samhällets stöd ofta relaterar till UM:s stöd till finländska civilsamhällesorganisationer. För att svara på samtida världspolitiska utmaningar bör Finland utveckla ett mer strategiskt och politiskt förhållningssätt för att stödja civilsamhällen och att stödja en för dem gynnsam miljö.



**Klausul**

Denna rapport är beställd som en del av UniPID Development Policy Studies (UniPID DPS), finansierad av Finlands Utrikesministerium (MFA), och hanterad av Finnish University Partnership for International Development (UniPID). UniPID är ett nätverk av finska universitet som etablerats för att stärka universitetens globala ansvar och samarbete med partner från det södra halvklotet, till stöd för en hållbar utveckling. UniPID DPS-verktyget stärker en kunskapsbaserad utvecklingspolicy genom att identifiera de mest lämpliga, tillgängliga forskarna för att svara på utrikesministeriets kunskapsbehov i rätt tid och att underlätta ett ramverk för en dialog mellan forskare och departementstjänstemän. Innehållet i denna rapport återspeglar inte Finlands utrikesministeriums officiella uppfattning. Ansvaret för informationen och åsikterna i rapporten ligger helt på författarna.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Nyckelord** | utvecklingssamarbetspolitik, medborgarsamhälle, medborgarorganisationer, demokrati, auktoritarism |

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# FOREWORD

A free, diverse and independent civil society is the cornerstone of democracy. It lays the foundation for lasting peace, stable societies and sustainable development. Finland has benefited from a vibrant and active civil society and an open dialogue that have shaped our democracy and built social trust.

Supporting civil society is an important part of Finland's development policy and a key issue from the perspective of both human rights and sustainable development.

According to CIVICUS, the state of civil society has been shrinking globally for over a decade. Today, only 3.1% of the world's population lives in countries with an open civic space. This threatens the realization of human rights and the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The shrinking space for civil society can be seen as a part of a wider decline of democracy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, civic rights have been restricted. While building back better, the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and expression must be restored and strengthened. We as Finland can do our part. We must ensure that civic space is protected and an active partnership with civil society is enhanced.

The Guidelines for Civil Society in Development Policy, published in 2010 and updated in 2017, provide guidance for Finland in its efforts to strengthen civil societies in developing countries. The Guidelines state that in all activities funded from the Ministry's development cooperation appropriations, attention must be given to strengthening civil societies, and also that no action harms the enabling environment of civil society. In order to tackle the current global challenges and ensure continuous effective ways of working, we need to scrutinize our practices to implement these Guidelines. This work requires a wide range of expertise and broad stakeholder involvement.

The Ministry has commissioned this study to guide us further in our work to strengthen civil societies. It provides a comprehensive analysis and concrete recommendations. It also shows that the Guidelines continue to be an important part of our toolkit to support civil society. There are, however, elements that still require further attention. The study points out that we need a more systematic approach to strengthening civil society as part of Finland's broader development policy and cooperation.

We have seen that diverse and pluralistic civil society cannot be taken for granted. We must stand for our values and promote an enabling environment for civil society and fulfillment of civic rights. I see this study as an important step in improving our efforts. We look forward to continuing an active dialogue with our partners in our work to strengthen civil societies.

Titta Maja, Director General
Department of Development Policy, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is a commissioned study for the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland (MFA) about the strengthening of civil societies and advancing their enabling environment in Finland's development policy and cooperation. In 2017, the MFA launched the most recent *Guidelines for Civil Society in Development Policy*. The Guidelines underline how independent, vibrant and pluralistic civil societies create the prerequisites for the peaceful participation of citizens in society and for the realization of human rights. The Guidelines state that all activities funded through Finland's development cooperation funds must give attention to practices that strengthen civil societies. Furthermore, any "activities must not impair the enabling environment of the civil society". The Civil Society Unit, KEO-30, regularly receives evidence and reports on the ways in which Finnish civil society organizations support civil societies in the global South. However, little is known about how the Guidelines have been put into practice across the Finnish development policy and within the variety of activities supported by the development cooperation funding. To address this gap, this study analyzes how different forms of Finnish development cooperation strengthen civil societies and advance the enabling environment of civil society. It also suggests recommendations and best practices for mainstreaming the Guidelines for Civil Society in Development Policy across Finland's development cooperation and policy in the most meaningful way.

The research methods and analysis are interdisciplinary and based on document analysis and interviews to learn about the practices, to identify gaps as well as collect ideas for future action. Additionally, an online participatory workshop was arranged to facilitate dialogue between Finnish CSOs, MFA staff, and private sector representatives. While the study is informed by research and existing academic knowledge and theories about civil society, citizenship, and democracy, its approach is practical. The main target audience is development practitioners, including the MFA staff, Finnish embassies, civil society actors, and the private sector. The aim is to respond to the MFA knowledge needs and, subsequently, to support knowledge-based development policy planning and practice.

The results indicate that the strengthening of civil societies in the global South is perceived as very important across Finnish development policy sectors. It appears that the position of the support to civil society has strengthened during the last three decades, within development policy as well as, at least to some degree, in political cooperation. While some three decades ago, CSO cooperation was disregarded and undervalued, today

the aspect is included in funding, resourcing, policy discourse, and official statements. In fact, Finnish development policy and cooperation supports civil societies in the global South through multiple funding instruments, including the UN, the EU, and Finnish embassies. Nonetheless, the study indicates that the incorporation remains unsystematic as it often depends on the individual officials' interests and capacities. The inclusion of civil society is not formally required as a cross-cutting priority. In general, strengthening of civil society is still primarily understood as referring to the activities of (Finnish and international) CSOs rather than the enabling environment or civic space in the global South. The theme of shrinking civic space is not systematically approached.

To respond to contemporary world political challenges, Finland should develop a more strategic and political approach in its support for civil societies and their enabling environments in the global South.

# ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| BEAM | Business with Impact |
| CIVICUS | World Alliance for Citizen Participation |
| CoD | Communities of Democracy |
| COVID-19 | Coronavirus disease 2019 |
| CSO | Civil Society Organization |
| DAC | Development Assistance Committee |
| DPF | Development Policy Financing |
| EENA | Enabling Environment National Assessment |
| EU | European Union |
| FELM | Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission |
| FINGO | Finnish Development NGOs |
| FLC | Fund for Local Cooperation |
| HRBA | Human Rights-Based Approach |
| HRD | Human Rights Defenders |
| IFI | International Financial Institutions |
| IKI | Institutional Cooperation Fund |
| IMF | International Monetary Fund |
| INGO | International Non-Governmental Organization |
| KEO | Department for Development Policy |
| KEO-30 | Unit for Civil Society |
| M&E | Monitoring and Evaluation |
| MFA | Ministry for Foreign Affairs |
| NDICI | Neighbourhood, Development & International Cooperation Instrument |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organization |
| NORAD | Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation |
| ODA | Official Development Assistance |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| OXFAM GB | Oxford Committee for Famine Relief Great Britain |
| PBS | Program-Based Support |
| POL-40 | Unit for Human Rights Policy |
| PRSP | Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper |
| SDG | Sustainable Development Goal |

| | |
|---|---|
| SRHR | Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights |
| SIDA | Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency |
| ToC | Theories of Change |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNFPA | United Nations Population Fund |
| USD | United States Dollar |
| VGK | Communications and global education support |
| WB | World Bank |

# 1 Rationale and objectives

This is a commissioned study for the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland (MFA) **about the strengthening of civil societies and advancing their enabling environment** in Finland's development policy and cooperation. The aim is to respond to the MFA knowledge needs and, subsequently, to support knowledge-based development policy planning and practice. The study was conducted between December 2021 and June 2022 by a team of five researchers from the University of Helsinki and the University of Jyväskylä. The team was led by Eija Ranta and Tiina Kontinen. While the study is informed by research and existing academic knowledge and theories about civil society, citizenship, and democracy, its approach is practical. The main target audience is development practitioners, including the MFA staff, Finnish embassies, civil society actors, and the private sector.

In 2017, the MFA launched the most recent *Guidelines for Civil Society in Development Policy* (hereafter the Guidelines). The Guidelines underline how independent, vibrant and pluralistic civil societies create the prerequisites for the peaceful participation of citizens in society and for the realization of human rights. Finnish and international civil society organizations (CSOs) are important partners for the MFA both at policy and implementation levels when it comes to supporting civil society in the global South, as well as in Finland and in the EU in areas of global education, advocacy and communication. The starting point of the Guidelines is the strengthening of civil societies both as an important goal in Finland's development policy and as a means to achieve other development policy goals. The Guidelines state that **all activities funded through Finland's development cooperation funds must pay attention to practices that strengthen civil societies**. Furthermore, any "activities must **not impair the enabling environment** of the civil society".

The Civil Society Unit, KEO-30, regularly receives evidence and reports on the ways in which Finnish CSOs support civil societies in the global South. However, **little is known about how the Guidelines have been put into practice *across* the Finnish development policy** and within the variety of activities supported by the development cooperation funding. To address this gap, the KEO-30 commissioned this study with the purpose to analyze how different forms of Finnish development cooperation strengthen civil societies and advance the enabling environment of civil society and to suggest recommendations and best practices for mainstreaming the Guidelines for Civil Society

in Development Policy across Finland's development cooperation and policy in the most meaningful way. Therefore, the aim of the study is to obtain information to support the operationalization of the civil society guidelines and to support the KEO-30 unit's work and dialogue with national and international stakeholders.

To respond to the commission, the research team has focused on investigating **how the strengthening of civil society and the enabling environment is reflected across Finland's development policy and cooperation and how this support could be further improved**. To address this question, we asked:

- How is support for civil society and the enabling environment understood in different parts of the MFA engaged in the implementation of development policy?
- Are the Guidelines seen as relevant and actively used? If yes, how? If not, why?
- How is support for civil society and the enabling environment perceived by selected stakeholders such as representatives of Finnish CSOs and private sector?
- What are the strengths and gaps in supporting civil society and the enabling environment?
- What good practices and challenges have Denmark, Ireland, and the Netherlands identified in their support for civil societies in the global South?

Finland's human rights-based approach to development and its crosscutting objectives (gender equality, non-discrimination, climate resilience and low-emission development) have provided a general guiding framework for the study of the strengthening of civil societies.

**The main research methods and analysis** used in the study were document analysis and interviews, with an objective to learn about practices, to identify gaps as well as collect ideas for future action. As requested in the commission, the focus of data collection was on the MFA and selected peer countries. Systematic data collection regarding Finnish and global South CSOs was out of the scope of this study. Within the MFA, the study covered not only the views and functions of the Unit for Civil Society, but also other areas of Finnish development policy and cooperation. Consequently, interviews were made with MFA staff working in different units and departments, not only those working directly with CSO support. Focus was on the department for development policy, the area departments and, to a lesser extent, the Finnish missions abroad. These interviews were complemented by three interviews with donor representatives from the Netherlands,

Denmark and Ireland, with the aim of learning from the experiences of Finland's peer donor countries on the issues related to civil society support, as well as four interviews with CSO representatives working in the global South with Finnish funding. To engage a wider array of stakeholders, an online participatory workshop was arranged on March 23. It facilitated dialogue between Finnish CSOs, MFA staff, and private sector representatives. The number of registered participants was 54. After the workshop, "good practices" in the strengthening of civil societies in the global South from Finnish CSOs were collected to the Miro Electronic Whitebord. These were complemented with four in-depth interviews with civil society representatives from the global South and receiving funding from the MFA.

The report is structured as follows. Chapter two provides a general overview of the current issues discussed around supporting civil society and enabling environments. The purpose of the chapter is to locate the scope of this particular study on Finnish development policy within some relevant ongoing international academic and practitioners' discussions related to the notions of civil society and civic space, and the justifications and dilemmas in their support. The relevance of these discussions for Finnish policy are reflected. Chapter three shifts the attention to international policy discussions concerning civil society support, and chapter four presents the findings from the interviews with the peer country representatives. Chapters five and six describe the core findings of this study based on the analysis of interviews conducted with the MFA staff and the documentation from the online participatory workshop. First, chapter five focuses on the findings concerning financial support to CSOs. Second, chapter six discusses the findings on policy advocacy and mainstreaming the civil society support. The final chapter presents the conclusions of the study and provides recommendations from the research team to be considered by the MFA in its further implementation of the Guidelines, advancing support for civil society and enabling environment in all areas of development policy.

# 2 Overview on current debates on civil society and enabling environment

In the Guidelines (2017), civil society refers "to the space outside the private and public sectors in which people can realize their active citizenship by participating in collective activities and debates. In this way, they can promote their own well-being and that of society". It further emphasizes different forms of civil society activities, and states that "civil society actors can form associations or choose some other way to organize themselves to participate and promote shared interests", in reference to actors such as "non-profit associations, communities, networks and social movements, established on the basis of a common theme, goal or ideology, and also includes non-commercial media, foundations and research institutions". The guidelines (p.6) also mention the need to actively defend civic space, discussed in the reference of restrictions posed by states. Overall, the definition of civil society in the Guidelines is wide and encompasses diverse kinds of civil society actors, but does not extensively discuss the notion of enabling environments, or the wider processes behind the restricted civic spaces.

Therefore, in this chapter, we provide an overview of the concepts of civil society and the enabling environment as used in the current literature. We will then discuss threats related to the shrinking civic space especially in relation to the decline of democracy. After that, we move on to situating the contemporary challenges to long-term political-economic and state formation processes in the global South. The aim of this background chapter is to contextualize Finland's development cooperation and policy.

## 2.1 Defining civil society

In Finland's development policy and practice, the notion of civil society, and therefore, its support, can be understood in many different ways when it comes to the question of what kinds of actors and activities are included. At the same time, there are multiple and continuously contested definitions of civil society in the research literature in such fields as sociology, political science, and philosophy. Development studies have debated over the applicability of the concept of civil society in global South contexts with different historical trajectories, often characterized by colonialism, from those European and Anglo-Saxon contexts where the concept has been established. Therefore, when Finnish development policy needs to be anchored in certain, explicit ideas of what kind of civil society is supported, it is also essential to be conscious about the potential discrepancies between the Eurocentric definitions and contextual manifestations of civil society in current political regimes in the global South, rather than pre-suppose global similarity of existing civil society.

In general, civil society consists of the voluntary and public activities of citizens to build the common good on the basis of shared values, goals, and interests. For instance, CIVICUS defines civil society as being "the arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organizations and institutions to advance shared interests" (CIVICUS, 2022a).

This definition resonates well with seeing civil society as **the third sector**. Western societies are typically built around certain well-established autonomous institutional arenas and sectors, which function according to different logics. The first, private sector refers to the economy, finance, and corporations that act on the basis of market mechanisms and seek profit. The second, public sector, refers to the state and municipalities, and their public welfare goals and services based on the logic of universal coverage for all citizens and residents, with tax revenue as the main source of resource. The third sector complements and challenges the other two sectors. It is formed by non-profit organizations and associations, with voluntary membership based on a shared mission. Discussions concerning the third sector expanded significantly during the 1980s, when CSOs started to complement state institutions as service providers particularly in education, health, and social services in most parts of the world. The private sphere of family and intimate relationships is usually located outside these sectors. In practice, different sectors often overlap and form what are called hybrid organizations, such as social enterprises. Strengthening of civil society from a sectoral perspective requires **a contextualized analysis of the relationships and interdependencies of each sector**, especially paying attention to the blurred boundaries between first and third sectors in contexts where informal economy is the most significant source of income, or the characteristics of the second sector in contexts where social relationships and political loyalty play significant roles in distribution of public services.

In Finland, civil society often refers to **non-profit, voluntary organizations and associations**. Formal and informal associational life is diverse and based on plurality of values and worldviews. This diversity can pose some challenges for development policy coherence, but at the same time, it is the foundational characteristic of open civil societies. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), recently replaced by a broader concept of civil society organizations (CSOs), are typically perceived as the main implementers of development cooperation. Some see NGOs and CSOs as synonyms, while others categorize NGOs as a subset of CSOs, which include a wider array from local neighborhood groups to national lawyers' associations; youth groups, cooperatives, community-based groups, village associations, environmental groups, religious organizations, social movements, mass organizations, and foundations. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) work transnationally, typically with headquarters in the global North and country offices or national branches in a number of countries.

**Picture:** Training, Tanzict, Kehitys-lehti

Depending on the national legislations and contextualized definitions, trade unions, professional organizations and educational institutions may also be considered as CSOs. In Finland, political parties are also considered to form part of the civil society, because their actions are regulated by the Associations Act (Yhdistyslaki). The media is an important actor of the public sphere and it operates at the intersections of the state, markets and civil society, holding the powerful accountable for their actions and exposing misuses of power, such as corruption. Much of social media and community media (non-profit media) belongs to civil society. When we talk about the strengthening of civil societies from the associational point of view, we must first identify the relevant actors of each context, then specify their different lines of actions, and finally assess what kinds of issues may either enhance or impede the operations of each actor.

While the third sector and associational perspectives consider civil society merely as a non-contestant sphere, the definition drawn from critical social theories considers civil society a **democratic sphere, field or arena that contests existing hegemonies**. Fundamentally, the task of civil society is to challenge power from the perspective of the most powerless and marginalized people. This function can be performed by NGOs and associations, but the critical perspective emphasizes citizens' mobilization, campaigns, protests, and social movements. From the point of view of democracy, a strong civil society monitors, limits and controls the power of political decision-makers and financial elites, and exposes abuses of power. One of the foundational conditions of democracy is

that civil society acts as a watchdog and demands accountability from political decision-makers and increasingly from other sources of power – corporations in particular. From the perspective of the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA), civil society actors as representatives of rights-holders hold the state accountable when it has not met its obligations as a duty-bearer, e.g., in the provision of basic services or in complying with international laws. Development cooperation projects that strengthen civil society should increase the capacity of rights-holders to monitor and hold the state, the duty-bearer, accountable for the realization of human rights. The task of civil society is also to create and promote new initiatives and new alternatives for transformative change. When we talk about strengthening civil society from this perspective, we are looking for ways to increase the freedom of civil society actors to express themselves, to disagree, to criticize and to present alternatives to current policies and development models – all key human rights that are essential for the functioning of democracy and people's ability to participate in political and social life.

The pluralism of civil society means that its actors can have different goals, beliefs, principles and ideologies. In a strong civil society, there is a constant debate, negotiation and even struggles between citizens about the directions in which society should be built. Thus, civil society can be seen as a democratic arena in which critical and pluralistic political debate is possible and desirable. This leads to the question of under which conditions can civil society be considered as such an arena, and whether support for enabling environments and open civic space can influence its formation.

### *Box 1: Reflections from the global South: Defining civil society and its strengthening*

In our interviews, CSO representatives from the global South defined civil society in multiple ways. First, people's organizing around a certain purpose and activity exemplified by teachers' and parent associations, youth groups and self-help groups were emphasized. Second, civil society as a place for formal and informal mobilizing to make the marginalized voices heard was stressed. Third, CSOs and activists tackling societal issues such as corruption and struggling for social justice by directly confronting the authorities were mentioned.

With the **strengthening of civil society**, they mainly referred to support for existing forms of local organizing, as well as capacity building for CSOs. For successful support, "tapping into the existing networks and structures" to realize the current "localization" goal was stressed. Flexibility during projects was valued, while "imposition of agendas and solutions" was criticized. In this regard, cooperation with Finnish CSOs was generally appreciated as something that enabled cross-cultural and mutual learning.

## 2.2 Defining civic space and enabling environment

In international development policies, both the notions of enabling environment and civic space are used to capture the field or arena where civil society action takes place, and which can both enable and constrain the kind of activities that can be exercised within that space.

While the notion of **civic space** is not thoroughly discussed in MFA Guidelines, it is increasingly present in both the international research literature and development policies. While some authors treat civil society and civic space almost as synonyms, most distinguish between civil society as a general concept, and civic space that scrutinizes the relationship between civil society and state, and emphasizes the role of state as either enabling or restricting civil society action. Therefore, the civic space can be broadly defined as the "practical room for action and maneuver for citizens and CSOs" (Buyse, 2018: 969). This is a space that can be constrained by the state through legislative, administrative, rhetoric and violent means. Civic space is not created only by top-down measures, nor is it static, but constituted in continuous negotiations between the state, citizens, and civil society actors. It is widely agreed that "civic space is the bedrock of any

open and democratic society", as stated on the webpage of CIVICUS, an organization that monitors the state of the civic space based on three fundamental freedoms and human rights: those of association, peaceful assembly, and free expression. Based on its measurements, CIVICUS classifies the stage of civic space in the nations of the world on a scale of open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed, and closed.

The OECD, for its part, defines **civic space** as the set of legal, policy, institutional, and practical conditions necessary for non-governmental actors to access information, express themselves, associate, organize, and participate in public life. The OECD Civic Space Scan monitors how governments protect and promote civic space in different national contexts and proposes ways to strengthen existing frameworks and practices. The Scan assesses **four fundamental aspects of civic space**: civic freedoms and rights, media freedoms and digital rights, the enabling environment for civil society organizations, and civic participation in policy and decision making.

In addition to monitoring civic space, CIVICUS also monitors the related notion of the enabling environment, defined as "the conditions within which civil society operates". It states that if civil society is an arena, the environment is made up of **the forces that shape and influence the size, extent and functioning of that arena**". It can be understood as **the legal, regulatory and institutional framework in which CSOs work**. Using secondary statistics, CIVICUS follows the conditions where civil society works based on governance, socio-cultural and socio-economic environments. It has developed an action-oriented research tool of Enabling Environment National Assessment (EENA).

Sweden's guiding principles for the CSO support (2019) provide a slightly different definition. An **enabling environment for the CSOs** is considered to have four pillars: 1) Conducive legal and regulatory framework; 2) Space for civil society to engage in multi-stakeholder policy processes; 3) Donor support to and engagement with civil society, and 4) CSO development effectiveness, including accountability and transparency. Here, the first pillar refers to international human rights standards and principles and international legal framework for protecting civil societies. This includes, among others, the freedoms of peaceful assembly and of association, freedom of expression, the right to resources, and the right to operate free from unwarranted state interference. Furthermore, the international standards oblige the states to protect the independence of civil societies. The sustainable development goals (SDGs) explicitly emphasize that all societal actors, including governments, business sectors, CSOs, universities, foundations, etc., are key development actors. Donors have a responsibility to ensure that CSOs have access to and a voice in multi-stakeholder partnerships at different levels. SIDA conceptualizes these two elements of the enabling environment – legal environment and policy dialogue – as the civic space (or democratic space). Donor support to and engagement with civil society relates to funding instruments, their size and operations, while CSO effectiveness concerns the CSOs themselves; their capacities, strengths and weaknesses.

There is an International Task Team for CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment that works on effective CSO participation related to SDGs. It consists of approximately 30 members, including donors, governments, and CSOs. Finland/KEO-30 is a member of the Task Team that seeks both to create **conducive environments** i.e., enabling environments and to advance the effectiveness and accountability of the CSOs themselves.

### *Box 2: Views from the global South about the enabling environment*

In our interviews with CSO representatives from the global South, they mentioned that building an enabling environment is essential, including supporting civil society actors to work to have dialogue with authorities and policy makers. Local and foreign CSOs need to strategize on how to avoid being "labelled as activists that work against the state and to be blacklisted". The participants cited restrictive policies that hinder CSO participation in Kenya, and in Nepal, burdensome bureaucratic hindrances for CSO registration and receiving funding. In general, CSOs were seen rather to take "diplomatic", "non-confrontational" and "partnership" approaches toward governments to be able to function.

Suggestions of strengthening an enabling environment included support for local CSOs to monitor changes in civic space and to organize dialogue, and **the Finnish MFA representatives to familiarize themselves with civic space issues and to bring those up in their discussion with Southern authorities**. Overall, a dialogue between Southern CSOs and Finnish decision-makers by means of CSO-partnerships, potential direct connections with the embassies, and production of briefing papers to be used by Finnish policy-makers, were recommended.

So far, we have discussed civil society support mainly from the point of view of the donor policies and definitions. In sum, we have pointed to two broad ways to understand how strengthening civil society in development cooperation can be understood. First, we can start from **the notion of civil society**, and focus on CSOs themselves, and support their ability to conduct their activities effectively, by means of financial and other support. The second option – which emphasizes t**he notion of civic space or enabling environment** – is to engage in analysis of the legal, administrative, political, cultural and other factors that enable or constrain their roles and their ability to operate, and seek to shape this environment towards a more open and enabling one. These two ways are by no means separate, but rather, interdependent: civic space shapes what kinds of civil society action is possible in the first place. Moreover, as the relationship is continuously negotiated, any kinds of activities that strengthen citizens and CSOs can, at least in a long run, shape civic space. In this report, we emphasize the importance of working in both different but interdependent ways to strengthen the role of civil society. In our analysis, we draw attention to both elements in Finland's development policy and cooperation.

In what follows, we will turn from the civil society support towards the recent processes that have shaped civic space and civil society action.

## 2.3 Recent constraints to civic space and threats to civil society

Over the last decade, the status of civil society has deteriorated significantly worldwide. Legislative changes, difficulties in registration, blocking of foreign funding, and enacting repressive regulations are some of the ways in which authorities are increasingly governing and controlling civil society actors. While the attempts by governments to control independent organizations and activists are as old as the state system, **the shrinking space for civil society – or civic space** – metaphor has been widely used to describe recent sets of restrictions and threats that affect civil societies worldwide. According to the CIVICUS Civic Space Monitor for 2022, only 3.1 percent of the world population lived in countries with open civic space, while 25.4 percent lived in countries whose civic space is totally closed. In 8.3 percent of the countries it is narrowed, in 18.4 percent obstructed, and in 44.7 percent repressed.

Finnish CSOs work in dozens of ODA-eligible countries, each of them having their distinct contextualized civil society characteristics and the status of civic space. Finland's bilateral and multi-bi-cooperation, for its part, focuses on five countries in Africa and three in Asia. Additionally, Finland supports several other countries, particularly in the Middle East and Central Asia. Of Finland's main bilateral and multi-bi-partner countries, in Nepal, Kenya

and Kyrgyzstan the civic space is obstructed, meaning that it is "heavily contested by power holders who impose a combination of legal and practical constraints on the full enjoyment of fundamental rights" (CIVICUS, 2022b). This group also includes Ukraine, the situation of which has drastically changed after the Russian invasion and war, and needs to be re-evaluated. In Ethiopia, Tanzania, Somalia, Mozambique, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Myanmar and the Palestinian Territories, the civic space is repressed. It means that in most of Finland's partner countries:

> Active individuals and civil society members who criticize power holders risk surveillance, harassment, intimidation, imprisonment, injury and death. Although some civil society organizations exist, their advocacy work is regularly impeded and they face threats of de-registration and closure by the authorities. People who organize or take part in peaceful protests are likely to be targeted by the authorities through the use of excessive force, including the use of live ammunition, and risk mass arrests and detention. The media typically reflects the position of the state, and any independent voices are routinely targeted through raids, physical attacks or protracted legal harassment. Websites and social media platforms are blocked and internet activism is heavily monitored. (CIVICUS, 2022b.)

Vietnam, where Finland has moved from development cooperation into private sector partnerships, has a closed civic space, meaning that both in law and in practice all popular organizing, as well as media communication, occurs through the governing party and is controlled by the ruling elites. Likewise, Uzbekistan has a closed civic space. However, even in the most repressive contexts (and especially in them), there are dissidents and activists, e.g., within arts, universities, who are in need of protection and support. Almost every authoritarian state accepts the presence of some kinds of CSOs, as long as the "discursive monopoly" remains with the ruling party and the state apparatus. As long as CSOs do not engage in public debate in ways that could create new ideas for citizens on how to build society and the political system in an alternative way, even authoritarian countries often accept their presence. In authoritarian countries, CSOs can play an important role, e.g., in facilitating interaction between excluded groups (e.g., disability) and state actors. CSOs may also cooperate with the state in service delivery. Yet, the restrictions of freedom of expression, association and assembly limit their role in demanding accountability.

It is mostly **democracy and human rights activists, as well as environmental and Indigenous activists, that are facing the most serious threats and attacks**. Human Rights Defenders (HRD) have been particularly threatened. While rights discourse had previously been quite limited in the field of development cooperation, by 2005 it had become prevalent in development discourses, policy commitments, and aid practice. In Finland, development CSOs were active in promoting rights-based approaches, and

since 2012 HRBA has been an integral part of Finland's development policy and practice. Some development practitioners have suggested that the change in the role of CSOs from service delivery towards HRBAs has contributed to provoking government hostilities. Relatedly, during the online participatory workshop organized for the purpose of this study, one participant noted that "many countries want CSOs to provide services rather than to act as advocacy and accountability actors; it is more convenient for them".

The key contributor for the shrinking civic spaces **is the worldwide phenomenon of withering away of democratic values and subsequent democratic backsliding**. According to the Varieties of Democracy Index, liberal democracy expanded notably from the 1970s until 2005, when it stagnated and it has started declining steeply from 2011 onward. It has been suggested that we are living in the era of "third wave autocratization", comprising a gradual decline of democratic regime attributes, including drastic violations of rights to freedom of association, assembly and expression. Autocracy is the opposite of democracy. During the last 10 years, the amount of the world population living in autocracies (electoral autocracy, closed autocracy) has increased from 50 percent to 70 percent. Of Finland's bilateral partner countries, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Afghanistan in particular have been declining in their level of democracy in 2021 as compared to 2011. On the other hand, the relationship between authoritarianism and restriction of the civic space can be interpreted from the opposite direction: it is the limitation of freedom of expression and association that enables the accumulation of power into the hands of the few, and a lack of accountability in the first place.

The Varieties of Democracy researchers have shown that the democratic backsliding over the past decade has followed pretty similar patterns around the world. First, authorities start to restrict and control the activities of the free media, to question critical scholars and academic institutions (especially in the humanities and social sciences), and to restrict the activities of CSOs and activists. Second, the persecution of the opposition starts, elections are rigged, postponed, or canceled, and other democratic institutions (parliament, the judiciary) are dismantled. In the last 10 years, the freedom of media and the freedom of civil society have been under the most serious attack. There is a quite wide consensus that **if the freedoms of civil society are not defended right now, all other democratic institutions are in danger**.

**Picture:** Newspapers in Yangon, Hanna Öunap, Kehitys-lehti

Some research has shown that there are linkages between populist governments and the shift from weak democracies to so-called "competitive authoritarianism", meaning that electoral democracy still exists, but the core issues of liberal or representative democracy, such as the free functioning of the political opposition and civil society, are violated. Support for authoritarian populism is growing rapidly, especially in the poor rural areas of the global South. Authoritarian populists often seek to speak in the name of the ordinary people, starkly juxtaposing "the people" and "the elites". They promise strong leadership and a direct connection between the people and the populist leader. When a populist leader rises to power, people may feel that they have a direct say in the issues of the state. At the same time, the populist leader often begins to silence journalists, CSOs, and critical scholars by branding them as enemies, e.g., by associating them with "the elites", and also as implementing a "foreign agenda" not beneficial for the people. Subsequently, the organized civil society is bypassed, when a direct linkage between the leaders and the people is established. These kinds of dynamics have recently emerged in some of Finland's bilateral partner countries, such as Tanzania. Relatedly, in the online participatory workshop, some Finnish CSO actors mentioned how recent crises, such as the pandemic and the Russian war on Ukraine, had brought up tensions with their global South counterparts regarding diverging perceptions of what democracy means.

It is therefore important to remember that, while there is a widespread scholarly understanding that civil society is crucial for democracy, undemocratic organizing also occurs within civil society. Populist movements, nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and racist organizing may also take place within civil society. In many countries, it has also become common to justify undemocratic, racist and discriminatory tendencies with "freedom of speech". Such rhetoric and other methods for restricting civic spaces travel transnationally. Countries like China and Russia have systematically increased their economic and political role in the global South and, consequently, have also introduced their rhetoric and ideas that have resonated well with the authoritarian tendencies of countries in the global South. Their increasing economic role has meant that many countries are no longer as dependent on OECD/DAC donor funds as they used to be, and thus they are increasingly able to oppose human rights and democracy conditionalities. The post 9/11 US War on Terrorism has also had a major impact on the rhetoric of how governments all over the world have legitimized the persecution of activists or shutting down CSOs on the charge of terrorism.

Authoritarian governments are well aware that development cooperation actors are building civil society in the name of democracy promotion and human rights protection. Consequently, they rightfully perceive it as a threat to their sovereignty. Since the 1990s, it was thought that globalization will wither away the power of the nation-states. Now, in turn, discourses concerning national sovereignty have gained new strength. In this context, civil society is increasingly seen as a threat through which foreign powers infiltrate into national affairs. The concept of civil society as a whole may be criticized and condemned on the basis of being a foreign (Western) invention. Some authoritarian and populist leaders take advantage of the decolonizing discourse and anti-Western sentiments for this purpose. According to researchers, even if authoritarian regimes would restrict foreign financial flows, the most valuable asset of development cooperation engagement is the interaction itself.

> Transnational exchange is a worthy end in itself because it can expand the imagination; it can provide the space necessary to perceive the possible – which in itself can have transformative effects. Finding opportunities for transnational cooperation and exchange in any capacity has the potential for wide social impact. (Pride Brown, 2018: 194.)

COVID-19 has deepened the already existing patterns on autocratization. Authoritarian leaders have been able to enhance severe restrictions on civil rights on the pretence of pandemic. On the other hand, civil society has shown its strength in times of crisis, when COVID-19 exposed the weaknesses of global South states to respond to the crisis, to protect their citizens, and to provide for basic public services. Civil society networks, neighborhood committees, women's soup kitchens, and other locally grown solidarity initiatives have been key for peoples' survival and recovery.

According to the DAC recommendation on enabling civil societies (2022), "members have expressed considerable concern that diminishing respect for human rights and democracy in a context of rising autocratization around the globe is eroding the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and expression, posing a real threat to civic space." In the online participatory workshop, several Finnish CSO representatives and MFA officials emphasized the importance of civil societies in the defense, protection, and promotion of democracy. One of the interviewed persons mentioned that Finland has responded to the situation of increasing autocratization by launching the Rule of Law Centre at the University of Helsinki. However, some respondents in this study brought up this issue commenting that the MFA has not yet adequately responded to this new situation, but that it definitely should.

## 2.4 Long-term structural challenges to civil society in the global South

In addition to the contemporary turn towards authoritarianism, there are structural challenges to civil society that are related to the diverse historical trajectories through which civil society has developed in different regional and local contexts. In Europe, the modern tripartite division between civil society, the state and the economy was built over hundreds of years, along with the secularization and modernization of society. The importance of lineages, communities, and ethnic groups in people's lives diminished. The modes of production created by industrialization changed the class structure of societies. Workers and peasants, who made up the majority of the population, organized themselves into their own organizations, which promoted the democratization of civil society. As a result of a long historical process, the individual became less bound by family and community, and began to function and organize freely in a civil society with those who shared similar aims and interests. If we think about the assumptions that development cooperation has about a modern, corruption-free and democratic civil society, then its underlying assumption is based on a certain kind of individuality in which the individual has the opportunity to choose, act and pursue what they consider important. This is closely bound with the modern notion of citizenship within the framework of specific kinds of the Westphalian state formation process.

In Africa, Asia, and Latin America, however, history has been different. It has been a history of colonial conquest, exploitation and violence, and for these reasons there has been no similar historical differentiation of social sectors as in Europe. When there is no clear differentiation of sectors, the state and civil society relationships may be more fluent and flexible. CSOs and the state might be "enmeshed together in a complex and multilayered network of material transactions, personal connections, and organizational

linkages" (Lewis, 2013: 326). This is a known phenomenon in authoritarian states, where CSOs might be extensions of the official politics. It also occurs in African neopatrimonial states, also known for their "big man politics", in which "resources of the political system are his personal property; loyalty to him rather than to bureaucratic norms or procedures determines official position, and there is little if any distinction between a private and a public sector" (Driscoll 2020, 521). CSOs might end up being extensions of clientelistic politics in which state resources, such as money, jobs and development projects, are distributed to the leader's supporters, often on an ethnic basis. Supporters may demand accountability from individual politicians rather than from the state as a framework of welfare provision. Civil society as a concept requires a certain kind of institutionalized state from which social actors can claim accountability. Consequently, **the strengthening of civil societies in the global South could also benefit from such state reforms that support its institutionalization**. Community is of great importance as a safety net when state institutions are unstable or even absent. Family, clan, village and ethnic group are still powerful sources of identity.

**Picture:** Mountains of Addis Ababa, Sanna Ryynänen, Kehitys-lehti

Colonialism in Africa installed a dual power according to which the modern state governed in cities and traditional rulers governed in rural areas through local traditions and customs. According to this view, the notions of civil society and citizenship were installed in cities, while the population in rural areas continues to organize themselves through traditional community structures and ethnic groups. One CSO representative observed in the online participatory workshop that, in addition to the Finnish CSO working with a local CSO, municipal representatives, and state officials in the African context, they also have to work with local chiefs and traditional rulers, who are important societal actors. Consequently, people's everyday lives in the global South may operate more closely with local political systems than with the modern state or with the civil society as the organized associational life. To put it differently, enhancing organization as an established civil society may require creating solidarities and relations across the boundaries of lineages, clans, communities and ethnic groups.

All in all, any work with the strengthening of civil society, whether supporting civil society actors or influencing civic space and enabling environments, requires a contextual understanding. **The contextualized understanding** is needed both on the historical construction of state–civil society relations as well as the current political developments of any selected country. In Finnish development cooperation, such contextual knowledge is gained, on the one hand, in embassies and in constructing country programs in the MFA, and on the other hand, through the long-term collaboration relationships between Finnish CSOs and civil society actors in the global South, as well as through the presence of Finnish CSOs in selected countries. Next, we will turn to describing the international policy environment and international trends for civil society support.

**Key idea**: Effective strengthening of civil society requires attention to its enabling environment: understanding how civil society is contextual and intertwined with global and national processes that might enable or restrict civil society.

**Recommendations**: Define civic space and its significance more clearly in the *Guidelines for Civil Society in Development Policy*.

# 3 International policy environment and trends for civil society support

In this chapter, we briefly describe the current policy environment for civil society support in development cooperation. We revisit some of the current international debates influencing civil society support in the framework of development cooperation, and discuss how it relates to what Finland is doing.

## 3.1 International policy environment for civil society support

The international community has officially recognized the crucial role of civil society in development efforts in the **Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation** (2011).

Most of the international development efforts are currently guided by the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the UN. SDGs explicitly name all societal actors, that is, civil society, business, foundations, governments, etc., as key development actors in the achievement of just and sustainable society, economy, and environment. The main method of the SDGs is **multi-stakeholder partnerships**. Supporting civil society is not among the main SDGs, but civil society actors are considered important contributors to achievement of all the SDGs, even if none of the targets in the Goal 17 for global partnership emphasize particularly the role of civil society actors. The idea of civic space, even if the term is not explicitly mentioned, is central to the SDG 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies, where some of the targets address the need to reduce human rights violations and establishment of independent human rights institutions. Additionally, the issues related to inclusive societies, participation, and transparent institutions are all typical areas and issues for CSOs.

While the SDGs do not pay much attention to the value of pluralistic civil society as such, it is emphasized by the OECD/DAC. OECD's Development Cooperation directorate established a work stream on civil society in 2017. It published an extensive study on how the members of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) engage with civil society (OECD 2020). The study found that CSOs are appreciated for their on-the-ground experience and proximity to rights-holders; their objectives include strengthening civil

society and implementing members' projects, and some CSOs were making efforts to streamline administrative requirements and implement learning-oriented results management. The report also identified ways to work better (p. 14). These included: to reflect not only the instrumental value of CSOs as implementers, but also the intrinsic value of a strong, pluralist and independent civil society; improve coherence by rectifying the balance between support through and to CSOs and other methods; streamline and harmonize administrative requirements; and expand funding and dialogue to CSOs in the global South and a wider group of civil society actors.

In 2021, **the OECD/DAC** adopted a **Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance**. Its objective is to "support DAC members and other development cooperation and humanitarian assistance providers to enhance how they address civic space and work with civil society actors, while underscoring that civil society actors must also take action to enhance their effectiveness, transparency and accountability". It is the first international standard that concerns the actions of donors, and which is specific to civil society actors. Its point of departure is the shared concern for the threats that worldwide autocratization and the diminishing respect for human rights and democracy are posing on the civic space. Second, it commits to supporting and strengthening civil society actors. Third, it also emphasizes CSO effectiveness, transparency and accountability. This recommendation was mentioned by the peer country representatives, who suggested the DAC recommendation should be taken more into account in civil society support.

The EU portrays itself as the global champion for civil society. The 2012 policy document *The Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development: Europe's Engagement with Civil Society in External Relations* recognized CSOs as development actors in their own right, as well as shifted from perceiving CSOs as mere implementers of development projects into valuing their fundamental role in democracy and accountability. **The European Consensus on Development** (2017) suggested that civil society should be mainstreamed in all EU development instruments, programs, and areas of cooperation. Currently, the EU has a **Thematic Programme for Civil Society Organisations** under its multiannual Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI-Global Europe, 2021–2027). It supports "an inclusive, participatory, empowered, and independent civil society and democratic space in partner countries, an inclusive and open dialogue with and between civil society, as well as a better-informed and more inclusive society with a developed sense of co-responsibility for sustainable development". It includes both targeted actions to support CSOs and the mainstreaming of civil society support through EU geographic programs. In 2021, it launched the Global Europe Civil Society Organisations program for the period 2021–2027.

**The international policy framework provides Finland a very strong basis and impetus for its continued and strengthened support for civil society** as an important development actor and promoter of democracy, human rights, and accountability. In addition to official policy frameworks, there are multiple current trends that are influencing civil society debates. Next, we will take a brief look at some of these debates.

## 3.2 Current international trends in civil society support

There are some ongoing debates that are likely to shape the near future of civil society actors and, thus, might be relevant to consider in Finnish development policies and practices as well. In what follows, we introduce a few issues actively debated in international arenas, as well as mentioned in our peer country interviews, and reflect briefly on how they are currently discussed in Finland.

**Responsive and adaptive management**. One of the most pertinent issues discussed in the support for CSOs in the global South has been related to the management burdens attached to the financial support. The requirements for accountability and reporting have increased, and a wealth of time in Southern CSOs is used in fulfilling the monitoring and evaluation requirements of multiple partners. In recent decades, INGOs and Northern CSOs have elaborated programs with well-defined outcomes and indicators. The program approach has enabled better measurement and articulation of the overall development contributions of Northern CSOs and their donors, but simultaneously, has often led to Southern CSOs to be perceived as mere implementers of their partners' programs. Consequently, the Southern CSOs, who typically have a number of foreign partners, struggle with filling in simultaneously diverse templates and indicators to report their outcomes according to each donor. There have been some attempts to move toward so-called responsive and adaptive management in collaborations, where the monitoring and reporting practices can be contextualized, new means such as oral reporting experimented, and room for adjustments in budget according to emerging needs provided. There is also a related problem known as a "starvation cycle" the donors are forcing the Southern CSO in, as they tend only to fund certain activities fit for their projects and programs but not to allocate any core funding to cover the running organizational costs. In the online participatory workshop, Finnish CSO representatives demonstrated awareness and repudiation of the donor-led project approach, and rather emphasized long-term commitment, strategic support to partners, and local ownership as desirable outcomes. Some suggested that the current program approach, which the bigger Finnish CSOs implement, allows more strategic core support for Southern partners, which should ease management burdens. However, it is not sufficiently utilized. Yet another pointed out that it is much easier to raise funds for specific projects than for programs that aim at larger structural transformations.

**New activisms**: According to the World Economic Forum, civic activism will be one of the world's megatrends over the next five years. Activism refers to direct actions aimed at enhancing a political, social, economic or environmental change. In many parts of the world, democracy movements and activism have shaped political landscapes. Human rights defenders, Indigenous activists and environmental activists have been threatened and persecuted to an unprecedented extent in recent years, especially in land rights and natural resource conflicts. New kinds of collectives, activist groups, and social movements related to climate emergency and ecological transformations have gained strength. A practical example to bring together donors and grassroots activists in the global South is the "Grassroots Solidarity Revolution" initiative coordinated by CIVICUS. Regarding human rights activism, since 2015 the MFA has had guidelines for protecting and supporting human rights activists in line with the European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders. The Guidelines are currently under revision, and the importance of supporting Human Rights Defenders has been further recognized as an essential part of Finland's human rights-based foreign and security policy in the recent Government report on Human Rights Policy (2021). For example in Kenya, Finland has supported Kenyan HRDs through its Fund for Local Cooperation (FLC). In the online participatory workshop, a Finnish CSO representative told how their organization has supported Indigenous activists' participation in UN conferences. However, another CSO representative suggested that the protection and support for activists is an area which would need the most strengthening in Finland's current development policy.

With the rise of new kinds of activism and activist networks beyond registered CSOs, the term fourth sector has been brought to the fore. The fourth sector refers to loosely, and sometimes spontaneously, organized groups, networks, or even individual events that are free from established organizational conventions, including the hierarchical organizational structure and statutory meeting practices. Activism may include elements of sharing economy, e.g. food networks, recycling networks, or it might be a neighborhood activity or an urban event. Self-organization and the idea of commons are key elements of new activities, as well as an emphasis on everyday choices. The emergence of the fourth sector has been much facilitated by digitalization and social media, where networking is more spontaneous and free from predetermined rules. In general, this new activism is perceived in a positive light, as strengthening civil society. However, some Finnish CSO activists have raised the concern that people tend to participate only sporadically, but are not interested in committing to long-term volunteerism in CSOs. There might be a generational gap; the youth identifying more closely with spontaneous and web-based activism than with associations. Furthermore, participants at the online participatory workshop commented that individual citizens are increasingly engaging in charity issues by collecting money, sending stuff, and establishing direct contacts with global South individuals and communities. This was perceived to be a harmful, rather than positive, issue by development practitioners. Furthermore, the new presence of social media has

led to phenomena that have been described with such terms as performative activism, slacktivism, or clicktivism. The criticism is that when people participate in activism through liking, sharing or tweeting, they may rather try to raise their own social media status than commit to a transformative change.

**Antiracism and antisexism**: During the last few years, we have witnessed massive social movements and activism for gender equality and antiracism, such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter. Especially INGOs have reflected the manifestation of sexism and racism in their work. Internationally, the revealed sexual harassment cases have resulted in the establishment of more explicit safe-guarding guidelines and procedures. Finland has addressed the issue of sexual exploitation and harassment as well as discrimination and abuse of power in its Ethical Code of Conduct for Development Cooperation, which is a prerequisite for CSO funding. However, addressing racial justice within the sector has been more difficult to address. Although much has been said about the role of local experts, decision-making and expertise are still often in the hands of whites from the global North. Furthermore, there are still cases, e.g. in fundraising, in which CSO discourses, images and representations of the global South capitalize on stereotypical perceptions of what it is like to be a racialized person. In countries like the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium, or Canada, however, antiracism debates within development cooperation have become common. In Nordic contexts, the problematization of the racializing aspects of development has only recently begun. With the lead of Fingo, the umbrella organization for Finnish CSOs, a series of events about antiracism and decolonizing development have been organized in relation to development policy and global education. As the Finnish society is a diverse and multicultural society and as racist and xenophobic political discourses are growing on the European level, it is of the utmost importance to consider antiracism as a key commitment for the future.

**Localization**: One of the recent trends in development is the localization of development practices. The localization agenda is especially pertinent in humanitarian assistance, drawing on the Grand Bargain commitments that emphasized the portion of funds that should be allocated to local respondents rather than international humanitarian actors. In development, moving INGO headquarters from the global North to the global South has been one of its manifestations, as well as the ongoing debates on increasing the development funding going directly to Southern CSOs without mediating Northern ones. Localization can also refer to shifting from donor-driven agendas to community-driven initiatives, and ways of working through collaborative methods. Thus, it means not only locally-based solutions and community and national ownership, but genuine leadership from the global South. For instance, an emerging network, #Shiftthepower, continuously discusses the ways in which the leadership in CSO collaborations could really be in the hands of collaborators in the global South when it comes to setting agendas and managing resources. In the online participatory workshop, one small group said that

"localization is becoming more and more important, with the role of local stakeholders increasing". Accordingly, when the groups discussed the main actors in development, some groups immediately started to list local communities, local government and CSOs in the South, while others primarily focused on Finnish actors who implement development initiatives. Many small groups emphasized genuine dialogue between partners and respect for local viewpoints even if they were different. However, some mentioned that in times of autocratization, polarization and war, the competing claims about such issues as democracy have created uncertainties as related to respect for diverse perceptions and values.

**New economic actors and arrangements**: Internationally, the fourth sector may also refer to the changing role of the economy and corporations in today's world. It refers to new kinds of economic arrangements that, in addition to profit, seek social or environmental impact. This includes more socially conscious corporations, such as social enterprises, affirmative businesses, or community finance, but also cooperatives, circular economy, conscious capitalism, as well as social innovations. Corporate social responsibility is one the most well-known approaches. Many of these arrangements operate in close collaboration with CSOs as they share similar goals in terms of social and environmental impact and as they also work with excluded and marginalized peoples. Yet, their operational logic is similar to corporations. Depending on the context, they can be considered to belong to the third sector or to the sphere of markets, or to formulate the fourth sector. This is an example of the increasing hybridization between different sectors. In Finland, actors such as social enterprises are classified as belonging to the economic sphere. This includes actors such as Mifuko, Leapfrog Projects, and Block Solutions. In the participatory workshop, many participants emphasized the importance of multisectoral collaborations, and wished for more flexible possibilities to collaborate between CSOs and social enterprises.

**Decolonizing development**: Among the strongest trends entering international development in general has been the demand for "decolonizing aid" or "decolonizing development". The decolonizing debate seeks to address the colonial legacies of development cooperation, as well as fundamentally to question the current ideas and institutions of development, arguing for plurality of ideas of what development, and thus, a good life is. In its institutional critique, it departs from the recognition that the post-WWII development cooperation system has its roots in colonialism, characterized by economic and human exploitation, violence, and systemic racism. Such practical issues as the leading role of donors, the emphasis on funding rather than other forms of solidarity, the attribution of power, knowledge and expertise to those coming from the global North are critically viewed as structures that may enhance contemporary forms of coloniality. Further, the use of terminologies such as "developed" and "developing" countries, which talk about the word in dualistic, power-laden terms, are criticized. The decolonial literature

urges attention in the ways in which concepts such as "civil society" are based on the historical trajectories of Northern societies, and suggest their contextual and pluriversal understanding. While many decolonial academics and activists oppose development cooperation altogether on these bases, others try to adopt decolonizing practices to aid practice. For example, INGOs such as Oxfam GB state on their website that the main task of their partnership team is to ensure that decolonial, antiracist, and intersectional feminist approaches permeate all their practices. In this aspect, the decolonizing approach seeks to address structural racism and power imbalances e.g. through systematic use of diversity and inclusion policies and practices. Additionally, it emphasizes design of Theories of Change (ToC) and responsive Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems from non-Western perspectives, based on locally relevant and Indigenous knowledges. In the online participatory workshop in this study, antiracism and decolonizing development were discussed in a few small groups. Both were perceived to be crucial issues, and the participants pondered upon colonial legacies of language, knowledge, and terminologies used in development cooperation, as well as the problems of representation and participation. However, some others felt that local ownership and contextualized knowledge have long been integral parts of Finnish development cooperation. In response, according to the decolonial approach, there seems to be a risk that decoloniality will eventually turn into a similar buzzword as "ownership" and "partnership", which have facilitated certain changes in collaboration practices, but have not resulted in any fundamental transformations in systemic global power relations.

**Key idea**: There are a number of relevant international policies that guide civil society support, such as funding for Southern CSOs, and influence the civic space and their innovative combinations. Within the CSO development cooperation, there are several emerging discussions such as localization, decolonization and antiracism, which seek to change the systemic power relations within the field.

# 4 Lessons learned from the peer countries

To learn from the best practices in selected peer countries, the team revisited the policies and interviewed representatives from the Ministries in charge of the civil society support in Denmark, Ireland, and the Netherlands. These countries have strong traditions in active civil society support, and they have recently searched for better ways to support civil society and ensure an enabling environment. Their themes and priorities are close to those of Finland. However, the amount of funding channelled through CSOs differs. According to the statistics presented in the OECD (2020) report, in 2018 the Netherlands allocated ODA to and through the CSOs total of 1,032 million US dollars, while the allocations of Ireland (200 million USD), Denmark (474 million USD), and Finland (121 million USD) were significantly lower. There might be differences between countries regarding what is counted under ODA allocations through CSOs, but the figures give an idea of a range of share of civil society support in development policy implementation.

In general, civil society has been central both in Finland's and in the peer countries' development policies, not least because of the strong domestic civil society in these countries and its significant historical role in establishing and modifying development cooperation. In what follows, a brief overview of the guiding policies and existing funding mechanisms is provided, followed by revisiting some of the ongoing trends and recommendations for Finland put forward in the interviews.

## 4.1 Policy and funding frameworks for civil society in Denmark, Ireland and the Netherlands

Relevant points of comparison include the overall policy framework that guide civil society support and strengthening an enabling environment, as well as diverse funding mechanisms. Overall, the policies and funding mechanisms were quite similar to those in Finland. Denmark does not currently have a separate policy for civil society support, the Irish Policy from 2008 is under renewal, while the Netherlands has a policy for strengthening civil society with the current framework running from 2021–2025. All general development policies align with the SDGs, but emphasize civil society support in slightly different ways. Ireland's policy stresses civil society as a priority based on the Irish track record in international human rights action, Denmark's policy pays attention to

civil society as a foundation to democracy and as a base for a sustainable world without poverty, while the overall development of Netherland's policy, which covers trade and development, emphasizes civil society as a guarantee for inclusive governance and business, and the specific policy for strengthening civil society emphasizes civil society being essential to an inclusive society and well-functioning democracy. Funding for civil society is allocated, first through strategic partnerships with CSOs, similar to Finland's program funding; second, through project funding for smaller CSOs, which might be contracted out to be administered by other organizations; third, funding for humanitarian aid, and fourth, through some funds to civil society administered by the embassies. The main differences compared to Finnish funding instruments were mechanisms of allocating pool-funding, either for national umbrella organizations or networks in the global South to be further administered by them to give grants for CSOs. Additionally, the Netherlands' model of funding strategic partnerships with CSO consortia, where the Southern CSOs are encouraged to be the lead or consortium partners receiving the funding, was a model not used in other countries.

In **Denmark**, development cooperation is guided by an overall strategy: *The World We Share: Denmark's Strategy for Development Cooperation* (Government of Denmark, 2021). In the policy, the issues relevant for this study play a central role, starting with the introduction that describes "global upheavals" that reverse already achieved global development and later on mentioning that "democracy and human rights are increasingly under attack in step with the resurgence of authoritarian regimes" (p.4). Moreover, the strategic vision of a "more secure and sustainable world free from poverty" is based on foundations of democracy inclusive of the "human rights, the rule of law, gender equality and **an independent civil society**" (p.7). Further, the existence of well-functioning democracy and diverse civil society is connected with a greater prosperity, and the threats to civil society actors and lack of trust between citizens and states and the pressure for civic space and democracy (p.16) are mentioned as issues of central concern for Danish development policy. The section concerning partnerships states that Denmark will "work to build and strengthen locally based civil society actors – particularly through the Danish partners – and ensure a robust defense of civic space in developing countries". There is no specific civil society policy or strategy, as there are no sub-strategies. The more detailed guidance is given in internal documents, and a Guidance Note provided to CSOs. The support for civil society is administered in the Department for Humanitarian Action, Civil Society, and Public Engagement in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The interview participant stressed that the focus is on "supporting civil society in its own right" rather than as an implementer of other policy goals.

In **Ireland**, the development cooperation is currently guided by the policy document *A Better World: Ireland's Policy for International Development* (Government of Ireland, 2019). The interview participant said this policy is being refreshed in 2022.This policy resonates with the multi-annual, whole-government strategic initiative Global Ireland (2018), where development cooperation is seen to play an important role in the global world. In addition to being explicitly anchored in Irish foreign policy with commitment to Irish Constitution, human rights, and international law, the *A Better World* policy draws on the SDGs and defines focus areas of prioritizing gender equality, reducing humanitarian need, climate action, and strengthening governance. The Irish policy does not discuss civil society or civic space to the same extent that the Danish policy does. However, under the objective of strengthening governance (p. 21), **supporting and protecting civil society space** is mentioned as one of the intervention areas to influence protection of human rights. The civil society space here is said to be composed of grassroots organizations and private sector actors. The issue of protecting civil society is also separately mentioned in relation to praising Ireland for having been a champion of the role of civil society as a core human rights issue in international arenas for a long time (p.23). The most important units for civil society issues are the Civil Society Unit, the Humanitarian Unit, and the Policy Unit. After adopting the whole-government policy, there have been continuous efforts to update the current civil society policy from 2008 to cover broader issues related to civic space, human rights, welfare models and other issues. According to the interview, however, balancing between the need to focus on selected themes in development cooperation and the holistic approach presupposed by human rights, within the current resources, has proved to be difficult. The interview participant suggested an institutionalized cross-unit task group focusing on civil society and civic space, which would be able to coordinate such an effort.

**In the Netherlands**, development cooperation is covered in the policy note on foreign trade and development cooperation *Investing in Global Prospects. For the World, For the Netherlands* (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, 2018). The policy note covers widely both trade and development relationships. Civil society is discussed in a separate section, starting with a statement: "*Civil society organizations have an important role to play in promoting greater social equality, providing public services, furthering human security and acting as a watchdog in making the activities of governments and businesses more inclusive*", and further stresses how civil society is under pressure in many parts of the world, leading to a situation where "governments are depriving themselves of opportunities to consult with civil society to make their policies more inclusive and efficient". The document mentions the need to form a new civil society policy, and a new policy framework for strengthening civil society (2021–2025) has been established. This framework includes four grant instruments: Power of Voices Partnership; Power of Women; Women, Peace and Security, and SRHR Partnership Fund, which each have a separate policy note but are all embedded in one shared Theory of Change (ToC) concerning

strengthening civil society. With this policy framework and its predecisive policy Dialogue and Dissent, the Netherlands focuses on supporting civil society in its independent role rather than as an implementer of other goals.

There were multiple **funding instruments** for civil society support in the peer countries, including long-term support, project support, support for INGOs, and humanitarian aid, which, in general, were very similar compared to the Finnish instruments. In **Denmark**, the ministry currently works in four-year strategic partnership with 18 Danish CSOs aligned with development policy, and provides support to international organizations working with civic space (e.g. free media). Additionally, there are a number of pool-schemes where a pool-scheme manager such as an umbrella CSO administers project funding for small CSOs. **Irish Aid** within the Department of Foreign Affairs supports civil society in a number of ways. The support administered by the Civil Society Unit includes multiannual program grants for 14 partner organizations, such as Trocaire. There is also a Civil Society Fund, where organizations can apply for project grants, and support to a few strategic partners such as umbrella organizations for CSOs and umbrella for missionary organizations. The program partners are registered in Ireland, but projects from civil society funds can also be applied by organizations outside Ireland. Currently, the humanitarian unit administers separate funding for humanitarian aid, but the new scheme introduced this year has enabled for the first time CSOs to integrate their applications for development and humanitarian work. In the Netherlands, the framework of strengthening civil society currently supports 42 partnerships through its four different funds. The *Power of Voices Partnership* component supports partnerships that are consortia of Northern and Southern CSOs. According to the interview, 60% of the consortia have a Southern, local organization as an alliance member. Administratively, the lead party, either a Dutch CSO or a CSO from a low-income, lower-middle-income or upper-middle-income country, is the grant recipient and bears full responsibility for implementation and compliance with the obligations in respect of the grant decision. Besides the four policy funds offering support to consortia of CSOs, the Strengthening Civil Society Framework covers several funds available to local organizations. The Civic Space Fund offers direct support to local CSOs, the Leading from the SouthFund is a feminist fund managed by four regional women's right organizations that support women's right groups and movements, and the Voice fund offers grants to the most vulnerable groups. The Dutch Ministry also has plans to set up a learning program with seven countries, where partnerships for building research-based evidence are established with Southern universities.

## 4.2 Reflections and suggestions on civil society support from peer countries

In the interviews, the participants reflected some of their ongoing discussions, the main challenges and best practices in civil society support, as well as provided some suggestions for next steps for Finland, and all the like-minded countries. Many of the reflections echoed the wider international discussions and trends reviewed in chapters 2 and 3 of this report. These issues were brought up by the interview participants while we asked about the ways in which they support civil society, what challenges they have, and what best practices and suggestions they would give to Finland. We cannot rigorously compare these with the Finnish interviews, as similar topics did not spontaneously occur in many of them, and we did not ask specific questions about these trends. The Finnish interviews focused more on how officials across the administration understand their own role in strengthening civil societies in the framework of Finnish policy whereas the peer country representatives did not reflect much the processes and division of labor internal to their Ministries. Therefore, the following themes are merely ideas that can be further discussed.

**Using the OECD/DAC Recommendations on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance was a main frame of reference**. All interview participants mentioned that the recent OECD/DAC recommendations (OECD 2022) should systematically inform activities of diverse donor countries. Both Ireland and the Netherlands mentioned having been co-chairing the DAC working group on civil society, and emphasized how the DAC recommendations and the DAC Community of Practice on civil society can inform and offer a platform for effective and coherent approaches in supporting civil society and enabling environments among donor countries. Aligning strategies and agreeing on common vocabularies and requirements can help to avoid situations where civil society partners are required to be simultaneously conversant with multiple terminologies and requirements from diverse donors leading to high administrative burdens. It was suggested that joint ideas and strategies could be searched in brainstorming workshops, and by mapping funding barriers and gaps to protect civic space and ensure local civil society organizations are reached. Collaboration could possibly lead to joint umbrella funding for Southern civil societies.

The connection between **strengthening of civil society and influencing civic space** was discussed in the interviews. While both civil society and civic space, or enabling environment, featured in development policies, much of the support tended to be support for civil society organizations. Here, suggestions to support a wider variety of actors, including grassroots organizations and social movements, in an effort to prioritize locally-led development and addressing civic space, were mentioned. Moreover, while monitoring and protecting civic space was seen as one of the functions of the CSOs,

the role of Ministries themselves was also mentioned. Here, as mentioned by the Irish representative, the challenge is to find shared ideas and practices for influencing civic space across the different units in the Ministry, notwithstanding the generally strong commitment to human rights and civic space. The representative from the Netherlands agreed with these challenges, while the Ministry considers itself as a partner in the CSO consortia, not only in addressing shared goals but also working for enhancing and protecting civic space in bilateral and international efforts to foster that "our partners are able to reach their objectives". Ensuring civil society voices are included in policy processes and addressing civic space restrictions are examples of bilateral action. In conclusion:

> ….If the donor community wants to ensure that funding can flow to local CSOs, it at the same time needs to ensure that civic space is being protected and enhanced, and address the restrictions that are curtailing these freedoms and access to resources.

**Relationships between CSOs and Ministries** were also discussed in other areas, especially related to support for domestic CSOs. In each interview, the strong, influential and diverse civil society in their own countries was mentioned as an important element that shapes the themes and practices of civil society support. When it comes to granting funding to CSOs, there is always the tension between ensuring the independent and autonomous civil society and requesting CSOs to align with national policy priorities, or between allowing CSOs to choose where to work and limiting their countries of operation to policy focus countries. The issues such as seeing CSOs as partners who implement governments' development policies, or as independent partners with their own goals were reflected, as "[in] some instances it means that the CSO goals do not necessarily align with our policies, but there needs to be space for that". Openness in expectations and allocating time for dialogue were seen as remedies. Other challenges mentioned were the huge number of CSOs working on the same issues and in the same areas, who could benefit from combining their efforts, but the Ministry does not want to force them into such collaborations; additionally the dependency of CSO development activities from Ministry funding was acknowledged as a challenge. In the context of a huge variety of themes, areas, and priorities of CSO action, reporting on outcomes on the "civil society portfolio" level has proved to be challenging, but nevertheless, demanded by policy makers. This is related to the dilemma of seeing supporting civil society as means or ends; as a vehicle to achieve other goals such as SDGs, or seeing strong, independent civil society as a goal in itself.

In relation to collaboration practices, **adaptive management, flexibility and trust** were stressed. These applied both to the relationship between Ministry and CSOs, and between domestic CSOs and their partners in the global South. In general, fostering adaptive management refers to the possibility of responding to changing situations, for instance,

rapid disruptions in civic space. Especially in the strategic partnership, there was a will to be very flexible when it came to programming, monitoring and evaluation. For instance, the interview participant from Denmark told how in the beginning they conduct capacity assessment for the CSOs receiving funding, but after that the relationship is much based on trust, as "we do not provide rigid reporting requirements and allow 30% flexibility per year to allocate for emerging priorities". In Ireland, adaptive management as an element of the new program was mentioned.

The need to **strengthen Southern leadership** and **local-led development** was mentioned in all interviews. The elements of direct funding to Southern CSOs and shared decision making described in DAC recommendations were mentioned. In terms of funding, it was most prevalently inherent in the Dutch strategic partnership scheme, where 60% of the current consortia have a Southern CSO as alliance or lead partner, who then was the recipient of the grant. With Danish funding, in strategic partnership there was a requirement that a maximum of 20% of funding granted could be used in Denmark while most should be used in the global South. In the Irish context, the difficulty is to measure local-led development in a situation where most of the funding goes to Irish CSOs, but some of them further allocate a lot of funding to Southern CSOs while some hardly have any partners. In their new partnerships, Denmark requires the CSOs to report on local leadership also in other dimensions than funding, and the Netherlands encourages a shared decision-making mechanism in the consortia. In addition to funding, equal power relations can be strengthened by inclusive language and terminologies in collaboration. For example, in collaboration "nobody should develop the other" and instead of "empowerment we should speak of enabling". One participant stated that rather than thinking about the capacity-building needs of Southern CSO, "we should focus on how they might be able to promote more sustainable changes when not using the Northern models typically introduced in capacity building". The shift towards Southern leadership, would, according to the participants, require a fundamental discussion about the new roles for Northern CSOs and INGOs in the new kinds of collaboration. Currently, at least in the Dutch context, the Ministry is encouraging flexibility in CSO relationship, but as many CSOs have funding from different sources, they tend to adhere to their strictest donor. The risks related to funding for the Southern CSOs were also discussed, and a mechanism of risk-sharing between Ministry and CSOs was proposed.

Related to the Southern leadership, the more **fundamental need to address power imbalances and the need to decolonize** were also brought up in the interviews. The failures of the long-standing ideas of "partnership" and "local ownership" were attached to the prevailing, institutionalized power imbalances. Engaging in unpleasant discussion on the blind spots concerning power were suggested. The taken-for-granted ideas that Northern CSOs should be the receiver for the funding and play a bigger role in decision making was suggested to be questioned. Additionally, the powerful need to show

compliance and success while not reporting on failures was criticized and seen as a hindrance to find the best ways to support civil society. **Unlearning** from the prevailing relationships and practices characterized by explicit or implicit power imbalances was suggested. One of the participants pondered why, amidst the emerging debates on decolonizing within the aid system, CSOs have not strongly lobbied for it, and thus, the debates have not yet entered discussions in the parliaments. Another interview participant reflected:

> [The] general challenge we all have – we as a donor community – we are failing with our national NGOs, to re-define the role in supporting Southern civil society, something that Finland, as well as the rest of us, needs to discuss, we need to clarify the role of mediating CSOs.

However, working to strengthen enabling environments for civil society, both Ministries and CSOs, need not only acknowledge the power imbalances in the collaboration, but also the dynamics of political, economic, and social power in the respective countries and the global system. In Sweden and Norway, not interviewed for this study, there are some examples of the ways to systematically engage with power analysis that can facilitate influencing societal dynamics. One example to learn from is the Swedish international development agency SIDA, which conducts **power analyses** that consider the social, economic and political dimensions of power in the countries CSOs work in, and how they are interrelated. The power analysis is a prerequisite for the development of locally-adapted ToC as it maps the drivers and resistors of change in the context in question, as well as describes the structural conditions and power dynamics in which development partners act or are restrained. In SIDA, power analyses are usually done as part of the preparatory work ahead of a new development cooperation strategy, but could also be done on other occasions. In the Finnish context, such power analysis can be part of the drafting of new country programs, but not as explicitly. Such power analysis, with focus on civic space could be conducted in collaboration with some Finnish CSOs working in a certain country, their partners and local research institutions. Power analyses could bring together Finnish staff, partners, CSOs and other actors. In a similar vein, the Norwegian agency NORAD has conducted country-based **political economy analyses** that map state–society relations to be used in its bilateral development cooperation. Similar ideas were discussed in the online workshop of this study where the importance of power analysis was stressed. The idea of "engaging in critical analysis of structural power positions in various aspects of partnerships" was promoted in some discussions. Taking intersectionality seriously in policy hearings and discussions with partner countries was also emphasized in order to make sure that some societal groups would not be systematically left out from negotiations and collaborations.

**Key idea**: The peer countries Denmark, Ireland and the Netherlands all consider civil society and enabling environments crucial both as independent goals and as means to reach SDGs, and are currently reflecting on how to increase Southern leadership in civil society support.

**Recommendation**: The like-minded countries could establish a shared framework for support to civil society and enabling environments using the DAC recommendations as a guideline.

**Recommendation**: Initiate discussions on the re-definition of funding schemes and the role of Finnish CSOs within the current trends to strengthen Southern leadership and decolonizing development (e.g. considering the Dutch consortium model).

# 5 Finland's efforts to strengthen civil societies, part 1: Financial support for CSOs

In the next two chapters, we analyze the implementation of Finland's *Guidelines for Civil Society in Development Policy* 2017 (a document published to form a continuum with the previous Guidelines for Civil Society, 2010, hereafter the Guidelines), based on our interviews with MFA staff in different units, and other selected actors implementing Finnish development policy, as well as a document review.

After presenting the Guidelines (policy environment), we briefly discuss the way they are used and coordinated within the Ministry. We then move on to the implementation of the Guidelines, and Finland's efforts to strengthen civil societies in the global South. We structure our analysis according to the two main types of efforts identified in the guidelines: in this chapter, we focus on strengthening civil societies through CSO funding, and in the following chapter (6), through policy dialogue and advocacy across Finnish development policy.

## 5.1 Finland's policy on strengthening civil society

According to the MFA (Report on Development Policy across Parliamentary Terms, 2021), Finland's development policy promotes the following **cross-cutting objectives**: gender equality, non-discrimination, climate resilience and low emission development as well as protection of the environment, with an emphasis on safeguarding biodiversity. Finland's development policy focuses on **five priority areas**. The priority areas changed recently from four to five as the third priority area was divided into two separate ones. Because of this, the officials interviewed for this study often talked about priority area three when referring to civil society, which is currently under priority area four. The current five priority areas are:

- Strengthening the status and rights of women and girls, with an emphasis on sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Education, especially the quality of education, participation of persons with disabilities, and gender equality.
- Sustainable economy and decent work, especially innovations, the role of women in the economy and female entrepreneurship.

- Peaceful, democratic societies, especially the development of tax systems in developing countries, and support for democracy and the rule of law.
- Climate change and natural resources, with an emphasis on strengthening adaptation alongside mitigation of climate change; food security and water; meteorology and disaster risk prevention; forests and safeguarding biodiversity.

Within the above presented cross-cutting objectives and priority areas, **civil society is explicitly mentioned under priority area four, peaceful and democratic societies**. As one of its four sub-objectives, it is stated that Finland fosters:

> …a strong, diverse and independent civil society that functions efficiently and participates in decision-making. Finland aims to increase the participation of women and those in the most vulnerable position in the decision-making process. We take action to enhance the implementation of legislation and to promote freedom of speech, assembly and association. Finland supports independent media and the protection of whistleblowers and human rights defenders. Stronger and more frequent interaction between the public sector and civil society consolidates mutual trust and enables peaceful problem-solving. (https://um.fi/development-policy-education-and-peaceful-democratic-societies)

In the Theories of Change for Finland's Development Policy (2020), the corresponding outcome is defined in the following manner: "*The enabling environment for and capacity of civil society and persons in vulnerable positions to influence and participate in decision-making has improved.*"

However, according to the Guidelines, **all activities funded by development cooperation funds should seek ways to strengthen civil societies**. The mainstreaming of civil society thematics is further strengthened by Finland's commitment, since 2012, to basing all its development policy and cooperation on an HRBA. The implementation of the approach, defined in the Guidance note on Human Rights-Based Approach in Finland's Development Cooperation (2015), calls attention to the ability of the rights-holders to make demands and hold the state authorities accountable. In this regard, a significant role is given to CSOs as representatives of individual rights-holders, and as human rights defenders, which is reinforced in Finland's Government Report of Human Rights Policy (2021). The core components of the enabling environment, as described in chapter 2, are civil and political rights. In addition, as mentioned by some of our interviewees, HRBA entails enabling and promoting the participation of vulnerable groups, whose voice is often understood to be represented by CSOs.

Thus, the 2017 Guidelines demand the integration of strengthening civil societies in all work, and this is supported by the HRBA to development, but in Finland's cross-cutting objectives and priority areas, it is explicitly mentioned only in one of the outcomes of one of the priority areas. This creates a somewhat contradictory starting point for Finland's approach on strengthening civil societies.

### 5.1.1 Guidelines for Civil Society

The purpose of the Guidelines is to guide Finland's efforts to strengthen civil societies in developing countries as part of development policy. This strengthening is perceived **both as a goal of development policy and as a tool to achieve other development goals**. This dual function of civil society support is linked with two views about the role of civil society and civil society actors in Finland's development policy: it is seen as an element of democratic societies and as an implementer of Finnish development policy. In this latter role, Finnish and international CSOs are often referred to as partners in Finland's development policy.

Furthermore, the Guidelines describe **two types of activities** in which Finland engages to strengthen civil societies. The first entails **policy dialogue and advocacy** "to strengthen civil societies and secure their civic space" in international arenas (EU, UN, financial institutions) and locally, in the partner countries by Finnish diplomatic missions. Finland's commitment to defend HRDs is also mentioned. The second type of activity is the **provision of financial support**, primarily to Finnish CSOs and INGOs. The small-scale funding provided by embassies to local /Southern CSOs is also mentioned. The two forms of support reflect the two notions described in Chapter 2: strengthening *civil society* as an actor capable of operating in diverse roles, and strengthening the *civic space*, the environment that enables this actor to operate in these roles freely and independently.

Both ways of operationalizing the guidelines were reflected in the interviews to some degree, sometimes mixed and sometimes talked about separately. Both are important, but it is important to consider their differences, because they are complementary and the weakness of one affects the other.

### 5.1.2 Finnish actors perceptions about CSO guidelines' practicality

An important task of this study was to collect experiences of the uses given to the current Guidelines and ways to improve the guidance in the future. According to the interviews, the **Guidelines are not well known among the ministry officials**. Beyond the Civil Society Unit (KEO-30), many interviewees, while aware of the existence of the document, were not directly familiar with its contents and had not used it in their work. Discussing this, many interviewees spontaneously referred to the number of policies and perspectives to consider, while the hectic work schedule simply does not allow for engaging in depth with anything beyond one's urgent core responsibilities. These challenges are serious and have to do with resourcing. This perspective was repeated throughout the interviews, across departmental lines.

Those who were familiar with the Guidelines **valued the document highly** as a "good support for our work on civil society". These interviewees suggested that the way the guidelines outline the importance of civil society support clarify its logics and contextualize it within the broader development policy, connecting it with different priorities and describing the roles of different actors. An example of the high regard given to the policy guidelines is that they have been used as a model for developing the MFA's private sector policy, according to one interviewee.

While the document was considered as a good normative synthesis of the principles that should guide Finland's policy, and clarify what is at stake, **the interviewees emphasized the need for much more practical guidance, tangible ways to translate the principles into practice** in the everyday work by each of the actors mentioned in the policy: bullet points, or minimum criteria that can be used to ensure and enhance the incorporation of civil society support by the overburdened functionaries who struggle to find the time to consider all the cross-cutting themes in their work.

Despite the Guidelines stating that strengthening civil societies should be sought in all the activities funded by development cooperation funds, **many interviewees saw the role of guidelines more narrowly, as a way to orient the work of Finnish CSOs towards strengthening Southern civil societies**. Yet the responses by the participants of the participatory workshop to the statement "All Finnish development policy actors implement the guidelines for civil society", suggested a consensus that the guidelines are not necessarily known nor utilized even among the Finnish CSOs. Some representatives of major Finnish CSOs also raised viewpoints critical of the idea that CSOs should be seen as implementers of government development policy, emphasizing the independence of CSOs from the state. At the same time, however, many believed that Finnish CSOs might follow the content of the guidelines quite well, despite not explicitly referring to them. Civil society actors also brought up that the Guidelines should be developed in a more goal-oriented direction.

In other words, the interviewees suggested that the Guidelines state Finland's views on civil society but do not sufficiently guide the actual implementation of strengthening civil societies in the practices of Finnish development policy. Concretely, in addition to outlining the ways in which Finland can seek to achieve the goal of strengthening civil societies in its development policy, **it is important to complement the normative guidance by defining clear responsibilities and practical steps to be taken by the diverse actors, and specific ways to measure their implementation**.

### 5.1.3 The role of the civil society unit

Within the MFA, the Unit for Civil Society (KEO-30) is responsible for development policy in relation to Finnish CSOs and the INGOs. Many interviewees **held the work and support provided by the Civil Society Unit in high regard**. Describing their own unit's work and cooperation with civil society, many brought up the dialogue with KEO-30, or mentioned that such cooperation had resulted from an initiative taken by KEO-30. One example is the promotion of the inclusion of Finnish CSOs in private sector cooperation. The civil society unit also seems to form a natural entry point for Finnish CSOs to initiate dialogue with the Ministry, also on issues that fall under the responsibility of other units, such as problems in projects funded by other Finnish funding instruments.

Based on our interviews, the ministry officials largely view the KEO-30 unit as the actor responsible for civil society thematics within the ministry, and for implementing the 2017 guidelines. Yet, the explicit definition of the unit's responsibilities does not include responsibilities over policy regarding Southern civil society organizations, nor over the promotion of an enabling environment for civil society at a more general, global level. In fact, **no actor within the Finnish administration appears to hold explicit responsibility for guaranteeing and coordinating the strengthening of civil societies in the global South, and in particular, their enabling environment**.

Much of the unit's work focuses in practice on administering funding to Finnish CSOs and INGOs. Similarly, when we asked the interviewees across the development policy department about the importance of civil society and the work done to strengthen it in Finnish development policy, the responses often reflected the idea of civil society support (kansalaisyhteiskunnan tukeminen) as a funding instrument. Several ministry staff suggested that the importance of civil society in Finnish policy had increased, basing their argument on the high volume of funding to CSOs through the civil society unit and the increase of such funding in the last decades.

Nonetheless, as the 2017 Guidelines acknowledge, strengthening of civil society is also a goal of Finnish development policy in itself, and a crucial element of democracy. This perspective to strengthening civil societies requires engaging in advocacy and strategic dialogue that seeks to create an enabling environment for civil societies, and to ensure institutions and legal frameworks that protect the freedoms of expression, association and assembly. This type of work requires **stronger mainstreaming and assumption of responsibility by all actors and across Finnish development policy and cooperation**, and also **coherence with wider foreign, security, and economic policy**. While the Guidelines outline this kind of work in general terms, the document does not explicitly refer to the units/departments responsible for implementing it, except for the embassies. We will discuss this aspect in Chapter 6, and now turn to financial support provided for CSOs.

**Key idea**: The Guidelines for civil society provide a solid normative description of the ways in which Finland can strengthen civil societies through political advocacy and funding. Yet, no actor holds explicit responsibility for guaranteeing and coordinating the work to strengthen civil societies in the global South, particularly the aspect of the enabling environment, across Finland's development policy.

**Recommendation**: Complement the guidelines by defining clear responsibilities and practical steps to be taken by the diverse actors within the Ministry, and concrete ways to measure their implementation.

**Recommendation**: In addition to its role in administering CSO funding, the expert role of the Civil Society Unit should be recognized, strengthened and resourced in order to allow it to support the implementation of the guidelines throughout the Ministry, particularly regarding the promotion of the enabling environment.

**Recommendation**: Clarify the expert role of KEO-30 vis-à-vis other units, including KEO-20. Consider opening an advisor position on civil society, or explicitly strengthening this aspect in the job descriptions of the existing advisor positions on democracy, human rights or rule of law.

## 5.2 CSO funding

### 5.2.1 Finnish CSOs supporting Southern civil societies

#### General information about Finnish development CSOs

There are currently approximately 280 development CSOs in Finland, as evidenced by their membership in the CSO umbrella organization Fingo. In 2022, 23 of them receive multi-year program support from the MFA. They have professional staff, salaried positions, and a multi-annual program approach. The rest are a varied group that include medium and small organizations, who primarily organize their work through volunteerism or a few salaried professionals. Belonging to this group are also some large organizations, whose involvement in the development sector is, however, relatively limited. CSOs can apply for up to 85 percent of program and project costs from the MFA. Volunteer work or similar contributions can cover 5 percent of the 15 percent self-financing share in program support (7.5% for project support).

Civil society development efforts in Finland have long roots in missionary work, international solidarity campaigns, and alternative trading organizations. The Finnish civil society itself started to develop during the 19th century through associational life, religious work, and political movements. The Finnish missionary work through the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran mission (now Felm) started in 1862. Finland's largest development CSO, Finn Church Aid, was founded in 1947 to channel the international assistance that the Lutheran Church of Finland received from abroad for the Finnish war victims and refugees after the Second World War. During the 1960s and 1970s, liberation movements and decolonization struggles were supported by solidarity organizations.

The state of Finland got involved with CSO development cooperation projects in 1974, when it disbursed 300,000 Finnish marks to ten CSOs working in developing countries. During the 1980s, the CSO umbrella organization Kepa (the predecessor of Fingo) was launched, as well as the CSO Unit at the MFA (later to be renamed Civil Society Unit). Unlike, for example, in Sweden, where the administration of CSO development cooperation has been largely outsourced to CSO umbrella organizations, in Finland the MFA administers CSO funding. According to the Act on Discretionary Government Transfers (Valtionavustuslaki), the public authority cannot delegate the allocation of public funds to any other actors. This issue has been discussed and investigated over decades on multiple occasions both amongst civil society actors and different governments.

Different governments have emphasized different approaches to development policy. For some, civil society support has been very important, while others have had other priorities. This has also had a major impact on funding available for CSO development cooperation. In 2016, almost 40 percent of CSO development cooperation funds were cut, which led to layoffs and the closure of several programs. After that, funds have increased steadily. However, the lack of coherence and continuity in CSO support – and in development agendas and funding in general – is a debility in Finland's development policy. Despite the negative effects of the cuts in 2016, it is important to acknowledge that as a result of the cuts, Finnish CSOs have diversified their funding base and in some cases are thus less dependent on the MFA funding than before.

## Funding Finnish CSOs

Funding for Finnish CSOs serves the purpose of strengthening civil societies in the global South since Finnish CSOs partner with CSOs in the global South. This study pays particular focus on other modes of support than funding for Finnish CSOs, but the question of how well the cooperation between Finnish CSOs and CSOs in the global South enhances strong, diverse and independent civil society that participates in decision-making is crucial in evaluating Finnish support for civil societies in the global South since support for Finnish CSOs forms a large part of Finnish funding relating to this goal.

As mentioned above, the Civil Society Unit funds Finnish CSOs through program-based support (PBS) and by funding individual projects. The MFA also supports global education and communications of Finnish CSOs through a separate instrument (VGK) and CSOs with PBS include this type of work in their programs. Communication and education is relevant for the Finnish support for the civil societies in the global South as it informs Finnish people about development agendas and thus contributes to better understanding of and positive attitudes to development cooperation. Furthermore, the MFA supports the communication and global education of Finnish CSOs with a UN background.

Several interviewees seemed to consider support for Finnish CSOs as the main mode of support in Finnish development policy to strengthen civil societies in the global South. According to the interview data, Finnish CSOs strengthen civil societies in the global South in three ways: strengthening the capacity of their partners, empowering vulnerable groups and enhancing the enabling environment of civil society through advocacy. A synthesis report from 2017 of an evaluation on Finnish CSOs receiving PBS emphasized that Finnish CSOs need to strengthen advocacy. Likewise, this view appeared in the interviews; that is, that Finnish CSOs are strong in strengthening the capacities of their partners but need to enhance their own capacity in advocacy. Relating to this, the evaluation report on PBS recommended that the MFA should develop clearer guidance on how service delivery and capacity development could link with the promotion of advocacy. The interviews brought up that, relating to this, the MFA should consider what kind of support it could offer to Finnish CSOs to enhance their capabilities in advocacy.

Another concern that the evaluation on PBS as well as the internal report on project support raised relates to the challenges in measuring and thus making visible the contribution of Finnish CSOs to strengthening civil societies in the global South. The same concerns appear also in the interview data. While KEO-30 appreciates the way Finnish CSOs report about the results of their work in general, both Finnish CSOs as well as the staff at KEO-30 view that finding tools to measure and follow progress and achievements regarding the theme of strengthening civil societies in the global South is challenging.

Importantly, the amount of funding for CSOs is prone to changes, depending on the particular preferences of governments. Naturally, this impacts the continuity of CSOs' work. The Report on Development Policy Extending Across Parliamentary Terms (2021), however, seeks to balance this fluctuation with a clear commitment in increasing the role of Finnish civil society in development policy and cooperation. Relating to this, a CSO representative offered a critical note, pointing out that the strengthening of civil societies in Finnish development policy should not be placed primarily on the shoulders of CSOs.

In the participatory online workshop, participants commented on CSO funding in general by emphasizing the need for long-term and flexible funding mechanisms as funding should allow innovations and experiments and not require rigid adherence to ready-made plans. There should be a right balance between planning and flexibility. While participants acknowledged the need to be results-based, they also emphasized that it would be crucial to get funding for long-term processes with no clear outcomes – as supporting civil society often is difficult.

To analyze collaborations between Finnish CSOs and their Southern partners would require additional studies, which would use data from Finnish and Southern CSOs, but this was out of the scope of this study. However, when considering the ways in which the support to Finnish CSOs strengthen civil societies in the global South, it is important to notice the difference between project and core funding. Chapter 3.2. discussed this issue briefly as it referred to the problem of the so-called starvation cycle, which raises attention to the fact that in addition to project funding – in some cases even primarily – Southern CSOs need funding to maintain their basic operations, engage in advocacy and exist as independent organizations in the first place. Finland's contribution to Southern civil societies would be strengthened by a deeper analysis about what constitutes strengthening local organizations as independent actors, and what constitutes mere funding of implementation of activities.

**Key idea**: Many interviewees consider supporting Finnish CSOs as the main mode of strengthening civil societies in Finnish development policy. In addition to financing the activities of Southern CSOs, Finnish CSOs can support civil societies in the global South by strengthening their capacities, empowering vulnerable groups and enhancing the enabling environment through advocacy.

**Recommendation**: Develop clear mechanisms to ensure the continuity of strengthening civil societies despite the change of governments and staff turnover.

**Recommendation**: Make sure that all resources channelled through Finnish CSOs strengthen the capacities and leadership of Southern partners, empower vulnerable groups and also contribute to strengthening the enabling environment, e.g., through advocacy.

### 5.2.2 Funding through INGOs

Finland also channels funds to Southern CSOs through **international non-governmental organizations (INGOs)**. These funds are administered by the political department (POL-40), the civil society unit (KEO-30), and some other units. This mode of support is viewed as strengthening civil society in the global South since the INGOs funded by Finland focus their activities on the global South and work closely with local partners and networks. The funding can be viewed as eventually going to Southern CSOs, even if not directly, as the funding amounts are significant.

The concentration of the administration of CSO funding in KEO-30 makes sense from the perspective of administration. However, according to interviewees, **some units** that focus on political work and strategic cooperation with CSO partners in global processes, for example at the UN and elsewhere, **would find it politically useful to be able to provide financial support to their partners directly**, more flexibly. In their view, this could strengthen the relationship, and perhaps increase Finland's influence. **The fragmentation and the production of silos by the funding mechanisms** was a concern mentioned by several interviewees.

In addition to the civil society unit, some other units provide ODA funding to CSOs. One of them is the unit for humanitarian aid (KEO-70), which manages Finland's humanitarian funding (approximately 10% of Finland's annual ODA), mainly to the UN humanitarian agencies. Around 10% of the humanitarian aid is channelled to Finnish CSOs that have signed a framework partnership agreement with the European Commission's ECHO. The documents that define the principles that guide Finland's action make no reference to supporting Southern civil societies or promoting an enabling environment. Finland's Humanitarian Policy (2019), mentions the notion of civil society only once, in a quote from Agenda 2030. The role of local CSOs is not addressed in the document. Similarly, the Guideline Concerning Humanitarian Assistance and the Use of Funding, a document that contains the application form that Finnish CSOs must use to apply for funding, does not suggest supporting local organizations, nor does it require cooperation with them.

The lack of attention to the role of Southern civil society and questions of local ownership have also emerged in the current discussions regarding the triple-nexus approach, coordinated by the MFA. The aim of improving the coherence between development cooperation, humanitarian assistance and peace actions calls for renewed attention to the collaboration with local actors, recognizing their contextual understanding and the need to ensure their commitment. Based on the interview data, while many Finnish CSOs have strong experience in the three aspects, the question of localization has provoked debate particularly in terms of humanitarian aid, perhaps due to the relatively common practice of self-implementation by international actors in the emergency contexts. Considerations about civic space seem to build on a longer tradition in the context of long-term development.

Outside the department of development policy, certain units of the political department also provide ODA funding to certain INGOs and Finnish CSOs. The unit for human rights policy provides financial support to international human rights organizations as well as funds that support people in vulnerable positions, for example, LGBTQIA people. This is perceived to strengthen Southern civil societies as the INGOs collaborate closely with local CSO actors, particularly local human rights organizations. Furthermore, the peace building center of the same department grants funds for CSOs to support their mediation activities and mediation-related capacity building. In the selection process, special emphasis is given to local ownership as well as the role of the civil society in peace work, which is justified by the priorities of Finnish development policy.

### 5.2.3 Civil society funding through multilateral organizations

Finland supports Southern CSOs financially also through multilateral organizations, particularly within the UN. As emphasized by the interviewees, Finland's work in the priority area three (currently four, peaceful and democratic societies) is increasingly channelled through the UN and other international organizations or through Finnish CSOs, while very little bilateral government-to-government funding relates to this area. In other words, **the trend of decreasing government-to-government and increasing multilateral funding** applies to Finnish development policy as a whole but in particular regarding this priority area. An increasing part of Finland's bilateral funding is channelled through multilateral actors, as so-called multi-bi-funding. Some interviewees suggested that this is due to considerations of cost efficiency, that is, to reduce the administrative burden. In addition, some interviewees mentioned that using multilateral organizations is also assumed to be more effective, even though, as they also pointed out, this assumption is not based on research. Importantly, however, the cuts in development funding in 2016 were particularly targeted at the UN organizations and other multilateral cooperation, and therefore the increasing trend of the recent years might be partly explained by the reversal of the volume to the levels prior to 2016.

Finland's support for UN organizations is twofold and administered by the department of development policy and the regional departments. The department of development policy provides so-called core funding to UN organizations and engages in dialogue about the organization's "general program" at a global level. The regional departments fund UN organizations through their country programs (so-called multi-bi-funding). In the latter case, the embassies monitor the funding, which is directed to the UN organization's work in the particular country. Finland, together with other donors, supports the organization's country strategy and, according to the interview data, can have a very direct impact on the program. In addition to Finland funding UN organizations, Finnish CSOs receive funding from UN organizations and this form of funding is increasing.

Several interviewees referred to this type of funding as **an effective way to strengthen civil societies in the global South**, since UN organizations use local CSOs to implement their projects. Furthermore, the interviewees commented that **this form of support remains partly invisible**, since Finland merely funds the UN organization without having contact with the local implementing actor. Yet, **the role of civil society varies between different UN organizations**. For example, almost all UNFPA funding goes to civil society actors, because in most countries, work on sexual and reproductive health and rights is implemented by CSOs. Likewise, UN Women collaborates and funds CSOs and, for example in Kenya, most of Finland's support for the UN Women country program is implemented through Kenyan feminist CSOs. Other agencies, such as Unicef, mostly self-implement and cooperate with governments, particularly in education.

Since it appears that increasing amounts of funding are directed to UN organizations, particularly in relation to priority area three (now four), it might be useful for the MFA to consider **investigating the effects and impacts of this mode of funding to civil societies in partner countries**. UN organizations partner with local CSOs, which implement the projects, but Finland, as a back donor of the UN organization, does not necessarily have the possibility to evaluate how the partnership between UN organizations and local CSOs actually strengthens local civil societies, particularly the role of the CSOs as critical actors able to represent the voices of citizens.

Finland also channels funds to Southern CSOs through the EU's development cooperation. **The EU** emphasizes a strong civil society policy, and it has instruments to support Southern civil societies directly through the country delegations and offices. Part of the EU's vision is to seek ways to strengthen the voice and participation of civil societies and include it in decision making processes, e.g., at the community level. Since the launch of the 2012 European Commission communication *The Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development*, the EU has had four-year country roadmaps for its coordinated engagement with civil societies. Overall, development cooperation is a shared competence of the EU, funded by its member states, who can simultaneously also have their own policies and instruments. Thus, Finland operates in the countries of the global South through EU delegations that it funds as one of the member states. Finnish embassies cooperate with the EU country delegations and offices. For example, the Finnish embassy in Kenya took part in drafting the EU civil society roadmap, which seeks structured dialogue with and the strengthening of the Kenyan civil society. One of the interviewed officials considered whether Finland could participate in the work of EU delegations in countries where Finland does not have an embassy.

A further multilateral arena is the international finance institutions (IFIs), particularly the World Bank (WB) and the regional development banks. The WB has worked with CSOs since the 1980s, and the role of CSOs expanded significantly during the early 2000s Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). The WB states on its website that it engages with CSOs through "information sharing, policy dialogue, strategy consultation, operational collaboration, and institutional partnerships". It acknowledges the importance of CSOs, and uses them a lot as service providers and as "entry points" to the local level. However, the WB has also supported the watchdog role of civil society, e.g., in the field of extractive industries. In this study, we did not examine whether Finland's support for IFIs makes use of any specific approaches or instruments to guide the use of Finnish funds towards strengthening civil society. In the participatory workshop, however, the banks' power and ability to condition the use of their loans and grants was brought up, which could also form an opportunity for influencing this thematic.

**Key idea**: Finland increasingly channels aid to civil society through multilateral organizations. This support is, to an extent, invisible as Finland does not have a direct relationship with the local CSOs who might receive funding in this framework.

**Recommendation**: Consider investigating the effects and impacts of multilateral funding to civil societies, including the kind of role this funding implies for Southern CSOs.

**Recommendation**: Seek ways to ensure that Finland's funding to multilateral organizations, including the development banks, is used to strengthen civil society's independent role and capacity beyond mere project implementation.

### 5.2.4 Funds for local cooperation at Finnish embassies

*The fund for local cooperation* (FLC) is allocated by the embassies. The decision-making responsibility falls on the ambassador/head of mission. FLC is the only Finnish development assistance instrument that provides funding directly to Southern CSOs. This instrument is flexible, even though the funding volumes for individual CSOs are rather low. The embassies decide about the use of these funds, in other words, the FLC is not steered from Helsinki. The embassies decide the application criteria as well. The projects funded by the FLC support the goals of development policy and the specific country program. The funds are ODA and can be used in ODA qualified countries. Major themes supported by the FLC include gender equality and women's economic empowerment, the rights of persons with disabilities, support for rule of law and democracy, including independent media, and climate change and biodiversity. In some countries, FLC is also used for the development of private sector or multi partnerships, in cooperation with Team Finland.

In countries where Finland does not have a country program (thus other than the bilateral partner countries), the embassy staff drafts a strategy for local cooperation funds for thematic guidance. In some countries, a need might arise to support particular organizations, such as so-called watchdog CSOs. Some roving ambassadors have the possibility for FLC as well and it is often perceived as an important tool for networking and profiling in countries where Finland does not have a permanent presence. The FLC funds can be used based on a local situation analysis, and they can be used for both core funding and particular projects. The FLC Norm supports the FLC strategy and regulates the management of the funds, practices, agreement templates, monitoring, etc.

The FLC coordinator's manual guiding the use of FLC demands an analysis of the political and development situation of the FLCs' operational environment, including the analysis of civil society actors' capacity gaps that the FLC Programme may have to address. In addition, it advises discussing the FLC Programme draft with local civil society representatives. The manual also includes instructions on how to manage an FLC project for private sector organizations and partnerships.

The manual describes strengthening of civil society as (1) the creation of an enabling environment, and (2) promotion of the rights and capacity of rights-holders to organize themselves to make demands to duty-bearers. In addition, it notes that the civil society can play a role in service provision (3), but emphasizes that their role should be complementary to that of the government. Lastly, it refers to advocacy, which "includes the strengthening of civil society's capacity to carry out lobbying, networking and advocacy work on Human Rights, and its capacity to assess duty-bearers' accountability vis-à-vis the Human Rights obligations and commitments" (p.11). The FLC report by KEO-10 (PYM synteesi 13.8.2021) states that FLC should primarily be directed to projects that enhance human rights, democratic and responsible societies and sustainable management of natural resources. In addition, the report states that FLC is used to strengthen local civil societies and support institutional and private sector actors in projects that have development impacts. In some countries, FLC is used to support local HRDs. However, based on the interviews there is significant variation in the ways FLC is used.

According to the data used in this study, several advantages are attached to FLC. The FLC report by KEO-10 (PYM synteesi 13.8.2021) finds that **FLC is a relevant and relatively effective instrument** considering its size. According to the interview data, **FLC is particularly good for supporting democracy** and it is often used to support relatively small and autonomous civil actors, particularly to support the development of democracy. As also pointed out by some of the interviewees, small actors who support democracy at the local level can be very effective and their work demands only minimal funds. The costs of essential advocacy work, for example, are relatively low and mainly consist of core costs (something these organizations often struggle to cover, as international funding is mainly available for individual projects). For embassies that work in countries with no country programs, FLC can play a relatively important role as it enhances the possibilities for these embassies to support and engage with local civil societies. FLC is viewed as valuable as it complements the work done by governments. According to one interviewee, FLC is more important now than ever since the civic space and the possibilities for civil society actors to operate freely are narrowing in the context of rising authoritarianism. The ability to directly support civil society actors in the global South is ever more important, particularly when it is increasingly hard to incorporate the strengthening of civil society into the cooperation and dialogue between governments. FLC is important particularly where there are no other ways to support local civil society and human rights organizations.

Regarding recent trends in civil society, the study data pointed out that civil society action is taking new forms, as manifested by, e.g., internet-based movements. The MFA should consider ways to support these new forms of civil society action. According to the interview data, FLC can be granted quite fast, and at least in theory, also outside of the open application process, although this is not common. For these reasons, the FLC might provide a way to support less institutionalized activism, such as quickly rising movements or activists in need of protection. Several interviewees pointed out that the FLC is used to support activists at risk, in line with the Ministry's guidelines on HRDs (2014).

Importantly, the value of FLC is expressed also in terms of information and contacts. The interviewees emphasized that the FLC is very important as a way of getting information and direct contacts with local civil societies and communities, and to better understand the situation of the civic space in a particular country. Particularly the officers who work with democracy considered the FLC important for political work instead of merely viewing its value for the "operational development cooperation".

Instead of merely in euros granted, the value of Finland's support is in the connections as well. Direct contacts with civil society are precious and FLC provides a valuable way to keep up contacts. This instrument thus enhances the capabilities of embassies to better understand the state of local civil societies. In addition, it is valued as it provides visibility for Finland and enhances Finnish impact locally.

In addition to the advantages related to FLC, the interviewees pointed out that the direct nature of FLC increases the risk of misuse of funds, compared to other funding instruments. Related to this, the most significant challenge relating to FLC consists of the heavy administrative burden that it implies for the embassies, both in the granting phase and in terms of monitoring the results. According to interview and workshop data, not all heads of missions consider the FLCs worth the work. The receivers of FLC are often small actors that might lack the institutional capacity to provide financial and narrative reports of the required quality. This increases the burden of the embassies to manage the risks and results. Therefore, the interviewees emphasized that **increasing direct support to civil society in the global South would require increasing resources, that is, the number of staff**.

Some interviewees brought up that channelling funding through the Finnish CSOs has an advantage compared to the FLC, due to their important role in bridging the Southern CSOs and the MFA, as they can support their partner organizations in monitoring and reporting requirements, and better guarantee the sustainability of the funding compared to the FLC, which is always short-term.

The advantages and challenges relating to FLC have been discussed widely within the MFA. Although the appreciation for FLC appeared strong among the interviewees, the role and significance of the FLC as a funding instrument is not self-evident. While some view that the alarming development of shrinking civic spaces has led to more attention being given to the FLC funds, others express a worry concerning the future of the instrument. Much of the FLC funds were cut in the 2016 development funding cuts. However, some view that this was not due to the underappreciation of FLC but rather because the FLCs were an easy target for cuts because they can be reduced without breaking major institutional commitments with international agencies or partner governments. Some interviewees mentioned that the idea of strengthening the instrument and increasing its volume would only contribute to further fragmentation of Finnish aid as a whole. Some also suggested that, instead, the FLC could rather be seen as a strategic, complementary support to be used in countries where Finnish presence is otherwise lacking.

Possible initiatives to alleviate the administrative burden related to the FLC were mentioned by the interviewees included the allocation of funds to local foundations who in turn would grant funds further to local civil society actors. This has been done by some other donor countries, but the Finnish legislation prevents this. Likewise, there is the possibility of coordinating support locally between several EU countries to reduce the administration tasks of the FLC, but the same Finnish legal challenges apply.

According to the interview data, this legal matter prevents more comprehensive support to strengthen civil societies. According to this view, **Finnish development assistance instruments enable the strengthening of separate actors without the possibility to strengthen civil societies in the global South in broader terms**. Meanwhile, some of the peer countries are able to provide pool funding to Southern networks or umbrellas that then independently administer grant schemes for smaller CSOs in the respective countries. Nonetheless, within the Finnish legal framework and its current interpretation, the FLC is the only instrument through which it is possible to directly support CSO in the global South. Without the FLC, embassies are unable to support local civil society actors even when they find interesting actors who they would like to support.

**Key idea**: The FLC can be a highly strategic instrument, and provides a unique way to support Southern civil societies directly, especially important in contexts of rising authoritarianism. However, it places a heavy administrative burden on the embassies.

**Recommendation**: Ensure that FLC funds are strategically allocated to civil society actors, including HRDs, whose work focuses on protecting the civic space and the freedoms of expression, association and assembly and/or represent marginalized groups.

**Recommendation**: Strengthen the strategic use of the FLC in non-partner countries in order to support civil society space under authoritarian pressure.

# 6 Finland's efforts to strengthen civil societies, part 2: Political advocacy and mainstreaming in all development policy

While the development policy relating to Finnish and international CSOs and granting financial support for them is managed by the Civil Society Unit, the broader work to strengthen civil societies and their enabling environment is a goal that is – according to the Guidelines for civil society (2017) – shared by the entire development policy department, the area departments and the Finnish missions in the global South. In the interviews, we paid particular attention to mapping and visibilizing the different ways in which this aspect is integrated into the work of these other units and departments.

Many interviewees noted that **the position of the support to civil society has significantly strengthened during the last three decades**, within development policy as well as, at least to some degree, in political cooperation. According to one interviewee, it has become such a central part of Finland's agenda that there are no longer policies drafted within the KEO department without explicit reference to civil society. While some three decades ago, CSO cooperation was not considered as belonging to the core of development policy and cooperation, today the aspect is included in funding, resourcing, policy discourse, and official statements.

Nonetheless, our interviews with officials of different ministry departments, as well Finnish missions abroad, showed that the **incorporation remains unsystematic and it depends on the individual officials' interests and capacities**. The inclusion of civil society is not formally required as a cross-cutting priority. In general, strengthening of civil society is still primarily understood as referring to the activities of (Finnish and international) CSOs rather than the enabling environment or civic space in the global South.

## 6.1 Political dialogue and advocacy

### Country level

According to the Guidelines, policy dialogue and advocacy to strengthen civil societies and their enabling environment in developing countries takes place within international arenas, and at the local level, by the Finnish diplomatic missions. The guidelines emphasize their dialogue with different kinds of actors in partner countries as an important way for the MFA to defend the civic space and to promote the inclusion of CSOs in decision-making processes. The document also raises the importance of the EU delegations for the purposes of advocacy as well as gaining information.

According to the interview data, **Finland does engage in this kind of political work both at the country level and at the global level**. However, compared to the financial assistance discussed in the previous chapter, **this form of support appears less systematic and less visible**, as it is often undertaken as part of the broader work under other explicit goals, such as the promotion of democratic societies and human rights.

The interviews revealed that the Finnish embassies engage in diverse non-financial support to civil societies. According to the interviews, they can offer "moral support" to local civil society actors even when not offering any funding. This responsibility of the embassies is reinforced by the MFA's Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders and recognized also in the recent Government of Finland report on Human Rights Policy.

Some informants pointed out that cooperation with embassies, even without financial support, gives visibility that can provide protection to organizations and activists in a particular country. In some countries, embassies have taken more active steps in providing actual protection to activists under threat. However, this practice does not seem to be widespread among the Finnish missions, but rather depends on the proactive attitude of individual staff members in individual embassies. For example, one informant in the participatory workshop mentioned a program that the embassy in Tanzania used to have, for the legal protection of activists. The unsystematic and ineffective implementation of the guidelines for HRDs has recently called attention by Finland's national human rights institution (The Human Rights Center under the Finnish parliamentary ombudsman).
In the participatory workshop, it was brought up that the EU delegations have a much stronger human rights mechanism, and more significant political – and perhaps economic – leverage to engage in more effective political dialogue with the local governments. In this context, it systematically brings up the situation of human rights, as pointed out by one participant.

In our interviews as well as the participatory workshop, the role of the Finnish missions in **bringing together local civil society actors and Finnish development CSOs**, as well as rights-holders and duty-bearers, by holding regular meetings between them around a particular theme, was brought up. According to one interviewee, this practice is highly appreciated by civil society representatives in the global South. It also allows the Ministry representatives to get first-hand information and increase coherence on Finland's support at the country level to support the civic space. The embassies can also open doors for local civil society actors to meet with possible donors even where Finland itself is not able to take such a role. Yet, the interview data also emphasizes that the involvement of the embassies in contributing to the enabling environment **largely depends on the personal capabilities and interests of the embassy officials**; in other words, it is unsystematic.

The CSO PBS evaluation synthesis report, discussed in the earlier chapter, evaluated the embassies' contact with Finnish CSOs. The report concluded that the coordination between CSOs and Finnish embassies is not intensive, although there are some cases of good collaboration. As with our analysis above, the report states that instead of being strategic the links are administrative and can be based on personal contacts. The report also pointed out that there appears to be closer discussion between the MFA and CSOs in Helsinki than at the country level. Embassy coordination is described as "supportive rather than intensive" and this is often related to **the limited resources available to the embassies in terms of personnel**.

## Global level

In addition to the local level, the 2017 Guidelines describe the various international fora in which Finland seeks to strengthen civil societies and to promote their enabling environment in the global South. Finland influences the policy agendas and helps to make civil society voices heard within the EU, IFIs, the UN system, and other intergovernmental forums. According to the interviewees, the thematic of civil society and civic space is also strongly present in the work Finland does in **influencing the resolutions, strategies, regular discussions and dialogue at the UN**. For example, one interviewee mentioned Finland's political work within the UN to support feminist organizations, whose situation has weakened further as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The topic has been regularly raised in Finland's statements at the UN.

According to one interviewee, Finland is eager to support initiatives about civic space whenever possible. Within the UN human rights system, Finland seeks to promote civil society voices and supports motions to enhance the situation of HRDs and the enabling environment of civil society. Another example of Finland's activity to strengthen the voice of civil society actors is the initiative launched by Finland to promote the role of CSOs in the follow-up meetings of the Agenda 2030. This kind of work takes place also in the

strategy work of the UN development organizations, where Finland promotes its strategic themes. This is another point in which civic space is raised even if it might not be explicitly emphasized in the existing advocacy plans. Nonetheless, as pointed out by one ministry employee, **each government program's goals affect Finland's advocacy goals for UN organizations, which might make the position of civil society thematics vulnerable to fluctuations in political preferences**.

Within the ministry, much international advocacy work regarding civil society and enabling environment is done by the political department and, in particular, the unit for human rights policy (POL-40), yet some interviewees pointed out that the collaboration on strengthening civil societies could be improved between that unit and the civil society unit. For example, that could ensure that Finland actively participates in international intergovernmental boards and working groups that do direct advocacy work with governments in contexts where civic spaces are restricted. One of the interviewees mentioned that as Finland is a member state at the intergovernmental coalition Community of Democracies (CoD), it could participate in and take a more proactive role in its Working Group on Protecting and Enabling Civil Society. In this regard, shared participation between the departments and units might help alleviate the burden on limited resources.

**Key idea**: The role of political dialogue and advocacy is emphasized in the 2017 guidelines as a fundamental way to strengthen civil societies and their enabling environment in Finland's development policy. Yet, this is done in an unsystematic manner that seems to rely on the personal insights and interests of the officials, in the diplomatic missions and in the global arenas, and remains partly invisible.

**Recommendation**: Ensure that the promotion of civic space is systematically incorporated in all relevant advocacy documents and strategies in development cooperation, but also in Finnish foreign and security policy in general.

**Recommendation**: Ensure that the responsibility to systematically raise the importance of an independent civil society and its enabling environment through political dialogue is explicitly incorporated in the responsibilities (task descriptions) of ambassadors and heads of mission, as well as diplomatic staff.

**Recommendation**: Define and divide responsibilities for advocacy work in international forums regarding civil society thematics among different units and officials in Helsinki.

**Recommendation**: Define minimum criteria to be used in order to consider the impacts on civil societies in different phases of political and strategic decision making, including on trade policy (both in Helsinki and the diplomatic missions).

## 6.2 Country programs

The Guideline defines that strengthening civil societies is taken into account in the content and goals of Finland's country programs. According to the experts in the regional departments, **the strengthening of civil society is present in most of Finland's country programs**, although there is great variation between them in this regard. They pointed out that strengthening civil society is incorporated in the logic of democracy and good governance projects and, furthermore, some suggested that education, for example, is "one of the best ways to strengthen civil society". Furthermore, the interviewees suggested that **civil society support is rather easy to include in projects with some other main goal**, particularly by including CSOs as project stakeholders. This is the case with peace building projects, for example, in which **the incorporation of different actors in dialogue** is a central goal, and civil society represents one of them. In other words, even in cases where the country program leaves civil society unmentioned, **the goal of strengthening civil society is implicitly present in one way or another**.

Country programs are the documents that guide the development cooperation of the regional departments in eight countries, and in addition to this, one program covers three Central Asian countries (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). Overall, **the strengthening of civil society and civic space is seen as an element of democracy**, reflecting the role that CSOs are given as representatives of the rights-holders in line with the HRBA that Finland has been committed to since 2012. This change in the role of CSOs was already discussed in depth in the MFA's 2017 Guidelines for civil society.

On a general note, **the country program documents mainly view CSOs as political and advocacy actors**. They also pay attention to the thematics of enabling environment. Yet the **explicit inclusion of strengthening civil society in the country programs varies**. Some programs hardly mention the term civil society – even in cases which deal with priority area three (nowadays four) – while others explicitly describe the strengthening of the local civil society. In some programs, civil society appears merely in the form of **Finnish CSOs** at the input level (Ethiopia, Nepal) and as implementers of development policy, while the **local civil society** is absent. Importantly, however, in programs that do discuss local civil society, CSOs are viewed **as political actors**. The program of Central Asia stands out as one of the programs where strengthening of civil society is widely present as it is included in two of the program's three impact areas. The first impact area, equal societies, human rights and the rule of law, presents support to civil society as an important way to enhance people's access to rights. Civil society is expected to engage in dialogue with the government on the legal needs of the people. The program also explicitly refers to **the enhanced need to strengthen civil society to counterbalance the recent trend of restricted civic space**. One of the outputs is defined accordingly: "Finland's support will strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations (CSOs), so that they can contribute to relevant policy discussions in their countries and monitor the general human rights situation" (p. 10). The program also encourages dialogue between the government and civil society in matters related to the use of natural resources. The program views civil society as having a role in representing rights and benefits of the citizens in relation to the government.

In addition to the country program of Central Asia, the **shrinking civic space** is mentioned in the programs of Mozambique, Palestine, and Tanzania. **Tanzania's** country program takes as one of its starting points the deteriorated situation of the civil society and sets as one of its aims to support the local civil society actors to "act as watchdogs and defend open public space and the rule of law" (p. 7). Accordingly, the program defines "Enhanced capacity of civil society organizations to advocate for open civic space, human rights and rule of law" as an output of Finland's cooperation in the country. Civil society is also highlighted at the top of the MFA webpage about Tanzania, which states that Finland's development cooperation in Tanzania supports the functioning of the civil society. It was the **contextual country analysis** conducted by the Tanzania country team that showed the phenomenon of shrinking civic space, and the embassy responded to the situation by increasing its emphasis on the protection of civil society freedoms.

**Picture:** Workshop in Tanzania, Tanzict, Kehitys-lehti

**Mozambique's** country program discusses civil society and views CSOs as political actors, emphasizing the importance of protecting a free civic space. The program states that Finland enhances dialogue between the parliament and the civil society as one of the outputs: "The members of the National Parliament and selected Provincial Assemblies engage increasingly with the civil society in matters related to extractive industries, and budget planning and oversight." Finland also supports a research organization that works in the fields of critical social sciences and civil society.

**Somalia's** country program emphasizes the inclusion of **civil society in the reconciliation process**. The program names "Vital role of an independent civil society" as one of the key messages promoted by policy dialogue as well as promotes an operational space for independent media and civil society. The country program for **Palestine** is the only one where strengthening of civil society constitutes one of the three impact areas: inclusive state building and fostering a strong Palestinian civil society.

According to the above-mentioned country programs that discuss the local civil society, Finland's development policy aims to **enhance dialogue between the government and the civil society** where the latter's role is **to represent the interests of the citizens**. They reflect a strong will to promote CSOs as political actors defending human rights.

Although there are FLC-funded projects in Ukraine, somewhat surprisingly, the country program of **Ukraine** does not mention civil society. This appears odd, particularly considering the democratic backsliding in the country. According to the V-Dem statistics, Ukraine changed from electoral democracy to electoral autocracy during the period 2007–2017.

**In Kenya**, Finland has a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to supporting civil society. Civil society is present in Finland's cooperation in advocacy and policy dialogue with UN Women. Civil society is perceived as a recipient of support as well as one stakeholder with which to work in partnership to gain the intended results. Civil society actors are viewed as advocacy actors and in watchdog roles, instead of viewing them as service providers. As part of a wider donor working group consisting especially of the Nordic countries, Finland supports the work of Kenyan HRDs. In addition, civil society appears in inputs as "synergies with NGOs". In Kenya, Finland used to experiment with a support to Uraia Trust, a coalition of CSOs that distributed funds to various kinds of civil society actors. While the modality was perceived successful, it was ended, when the interpretation of the Finnish Act on Discretionary Government Transfers became stricter.

While strengthening of civil societies was absent in some country programs, it is noteworthy that when mentioned, CSOs were not viewed as service providers but rather in the role of a political watchdog or in advocacy. This presents a significant change in CSO discourse compared to previous eras when CSOs were mainly viewed as service providers. This change was observed already in the PBS CSO evaluation in 2017, according to which CSOs had been viewed "also as a means to deliver advocacy, capacity building and networking functions" (p.92).

In general, the implementation of Finnish development cooperation within the **country programs also allows for the inclusion of partner country CSOs**. Projects within the country programs can be implemented by CSOs, and some interviewees mentioned that bilateral, government-to-government projects are often implemented at the local level by a local CSO. Previously these projects were implemented predominantly by consulting companies, but local CSOs are becoming more involved in their implementation, according to one interviewee. Yet, as another interviewee reminded, in these cases, the local CSO tends to function merely in the role of a service provider and implementer of a project designed by others. Furthermore, local CSOs can be heard and engaged in other ways, as stakeholders, in Finland's bilateral projects.

Some interviewees brought up that Finland would not do bilateral development cooperation in a country where civil society is strongly repressed. Instead, Finland tries to find **different ways for interaction and for maintaining its presence in authoritarian countries, including by working with CSOs**. For example in Myanmar, all cooperation has in practice been directed at CSOs, even before the military coup, mainly channelled through UN organizations in the country. Funds for local cooperation were not used, because the embassy was recently opened and the focus had been on establishing larger partnerships. Earlier in Kenya, similar tactics were used. Instead of state actors, much of the aid was directed at civil society actors through UN agencies, oversight institutions, Uraia Trust and FLC. Similarly, in Afghanistan post Taliban-takeover, support to CSOs is implemented through UN and humanitarian funds. A problem relating to this is that in societies in which the situation is very complicated, many organizations might prefer not to receive foreign funding in order to avoid being criticized or targeted by the government for "aligning with foreign powers".

The PBS CSO evaluation (2017: 16) recommended that "Finnish Embassies should take more active diplomatic positions regarding the space given to national civil society". It would seem important **to assess how the role and activity of the embassies in relation to this theme have developed** since the evaluation (2017) and whether more measures are needed to enable the embassies to fulfill these expectations concerning their role in strengthening local civil societies. One interviewee suggested preparing a **toolkit that would offer concrete guidance** on how to engage with the local civil society as well as with the Finnish CSOs with presence or projects in the country. The need for clearer guidance for the embassies is evident, both in relation to the local civil society and CSOs as well as Finnish CSOs in order to ensure that they can fulfill the roles expected from them.

**Key idea**: The Guidelines attach a significant role for the embassies in defending the space of civil societies, yet concrete instructions, regarding how strengthening of civil society and the question of civic space are to be incorporated in the country programs, are lacking.

**Recommendation**: Systematize the role of the embassies at the concrete level and provide them with practical instructions and support to perform their role.

**Recommendation**: Ensure that all country programs consider the role and space of the civil society within the political analysis and the work under priority area four (previously three). Include local CSOs (and Finnish CSOs working in the country) in drafting the contextual analysis and the preparation of the country strategies.

## 6.3 Broader development policy

Interviews with officials working at the Department for Development Policy (KEO) in Helsinki revealed that the question of civil society support is commonly understood as relating to cooperation with Finnish CSOs and their inclusion as partners in diverse policy processes. The interviewees tended to talk about good practices of cooperating with Finnish organizations, unless explicitly asked about Southern CSOs. Another understanding of strengthening civil societies that emerged in interviews with KEO staff was to see it as part of the work undertaken to promote the priority area number three (currently four) of Finnish development policy: democratic and peaceful societies.

As one interviewee pointed out, the increasing importance given to the promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Finland's development policy, is also a good thing for the efforts to strengthen civil society. This increase has been visible, for example, in the new funding mechanism established to promote the rule of law. While the views of Ministry officials working on these issues emphasize the role of a free civil society as a fundamental part of democracy and the rule of law, the explicit inclusion of strengthening of civil society under this new instrument, as well the overall work on peaceful and democratic societies, remains unclear. For example, the Rule of Law Centre based at the Faculty of Law of the University of Helsinki, one of the two institutions supported under the instrument, focuses on supporting state institutions, particularly the judiciary. Despite the essential links between the thematics of civic space and democracy/rule of law, the connection is not explicit in the guidance pertaining to the funding moment. The same challenge relates to other forms of Finland's work under priority area four.

Beyond this particular priority area, promotion of peaceful and democratic societies, strengthening **the participation and/or the voice of the civil society is incorporated across the Finnish development policy to varying degrees**. A seemingly common perception was described by one interviewee: "Supporting a world in which civil societies are strong and participate in policy making is something that Finland is strongly committed to". Civil society support is not officially defined as a cross-cutting theme, and interestingly, many interviewees were unable to explain where the commitment to this goal really came from. Many interviewees admitted that they were not very familiar with the 2017 guidelines. They expressed ideas such as: "It is part of the Finnish way of operating". Some interviewees described the promotion of civil society inclusion in projects and policy processes as "so automatic that it doesn't need to be defined [in a policy]".

One explanation for the implicit commitment to strengthening civil societies is probably Finland's commitment to the HRBA, as mentioned in the previous chapters. This perspective is furthered in the cross-cutting principle of non-discrimination. Both are taken into consideration in the design and monitoring of all projects.

Many interviewees linked the implicitly omnipresent promotion of civil society participation to Finnish traditions and values. One interviewee suggested that Finland sees itself as a country that wants to defend a multi-actor approach to development and international politics, against some others that attempt to restrict participation and a plurality of voices, and to keep international cooperation as exclusively intergovernmental. This tendency seems to be linked with the strengthening of authoritarianism across the world.

Some interviewees referred to Finnish history and the way in which public life has been managed in the country, that is, in dialogue between the state and civil society. This is reflected in the way Finland operates in several global processes, for example at the UN. Finnish CSOs are, for example, invited to hearings before and after important meetings of policy processes, and included as members of Finnish delegations. As was pointed out in the participatory workshop, the current government has been very committed to the civil society cause. Finland also supports CSO representatives within the delegations to assume an active role in the official program and to speak up. Side events might be organized together. In some international processes, such as those relating to the international human rights system, this is a formal requirement of the process, while in others, like the ones regarding environmental sustainability, the close cooperation appears to follow from the central role the civil society has played in the national debate and process in Finland.

The idea of civil society inclusion as a Finnish way of operating is also reflected in the projects funded from the institutional cooperation funds (IKI). According to an interviewee, CSOs are often brought into this cooperation because multi-actor cooperation is a common way for Finnish institutions to work. It is hoped that these projects can trigger such cooperation also in the partner countries.

The idea of civil society participation being the "Finnish way" might help officials to consider it even when it is not explicitly mentioned in a particular policy or strategy document. However, this line of thinking calls for reflections on the structural and historical conditions that enable a free and independent civil society taking active roles in Finland, compared to the environment that restricts the roles of civil society in many postcolonial countries. Deeper attention to these conditions might help orient Finland's efforts more strongly towards ways to strengthen the enabling environment in the global South.

Examples of good practices in civil society support raised by the interviewees include both proactive and more reactive ones: the launching of an initiative to promote civil society participation in the follow-up meetings of the Agenda 2030, raising the role of the civil society during the Finnish EU presidency, inviting CSOs to co-host in the Generation Equality process, or inviting them to write half of the Agenda 2030 implementation report. These examples mainly refer to the inclusion of Finnish CSOs, even if in some cases Finland has enabled some Southern participation, mainly represented through INGOs, in the UN development organizations.

However, while the inclusion of civil society in different processes appears on one hand as self-evidently a Finnish way of operating, on the other hand, a worry appeared according to which the participation of civil society is rather a formality often without a genuine chance to impact change. Importantly, the good cooperation and even partnership between the government and the civil society, described by several interviewees, appears to focus on topics where the viewpoints and goals of the government and the civil society have been rather similar, such as environmental sustainability or gender equality. This has enabled both actors to see each other as useful partners. Yet, **it is not clear whether giving voice to CSOs would still take place in case the priorities of CSOs and the government would be more distant from each other**, and the civil society would challenge the government's position. Despite the many good examples and commitment to including CSOs into multi-actor processes and promoting space to CSO voice in diverse processes, the fact that this **inclusion is not based on an formal policy commitment and that its promotion and monitoring is not anyone's explicit responsibility** could possibly make it vulnerable to possible (political) changes in the ministry leadership.

**Key idea**: Despite the centrality of independent civil societies for the promotion of democracy and the rule of law and the HRBA, as well as the many good examples of including CSOs into multi-actor processes, no actor is explicitly responsible for coordinating or monitoring this integration, which might make it vulnerable to political changes, for example in the ministry leadership.

**Recommendation**: Emphasize the promotion of a free and independent civil society and the importance of its enabling environment in the guidelines on HRBA, as well as in current and upcoming policies on democracy and the rule of law.

**Recommendation**: Create ways to coordinate and monitor the integration of civil society thematics across development policy, for example by resourcing an advisory position in the civil society unit or by establishing a network of focal points.

## 6.4 The role of civil societies in private sector development

One example of an area in which the interests of civil society are not self-evidently the same as all those that the government promotes is in the private sector cooperation. Reflecting the coexistence of multiple interests within the government itself, tensions arise from the fact that the goal of these instruments is to primarily support the development of private sectors, and in particular the role of Finnish companies, which is not necessarily in line with some other goals of development policy. This is a long-standing debate, which in the context of this study is viewed from the perspective of tensions between the goals of civil society actors and those of private companies, in Finland and in the global South. As reflected in our interviews and in the discussions that took place in the participatory workshop, many Finnish CSOs consider these tensions very important (See Box 3).

### *Box 3: Views from the workshop: Discussing contradictions and collaborations in development policy*

In the participatory workshop, some groups discussed what were called "fundamental contradictions" when it comes to collaboration with states and civil society actors as well as civil society and the private sector. While the leaders of many countries with which Finland collaborates emphasize economic growth and industrialization, and do not value – or even explicitly hinder – strengthening civil society, Finland and the EU stress the importance of civil society for a democratic society. It is a great challenge to address this contradiction, and try to make a "strong civil society" attractive and desirable in those contexts. Perhaps **more evidence between economic prosperity and democratic governance should be provided to convince the partner country leadership**. Relating to this, participants in one group also emphasized the need to be explicit about the **value-base** of policy and practice and emphasize values and strong civil society as a global competitive advance and democratic societies as overall goals of development. At the same time, participants emphasized the importance of respecting the points of views from the partners; and also permission to think differently on values.

In a similar vein, the hitherto positive effects of Finnish development cooperation were discussed. It was brought up that while there have been positive outcomes, authoritarian governments still continue to flourish in many partner countries.Therefore, as one of the inputs in the best practices Miro board states, **civil society should be supported both "in public and in the cabinets**".

Additionally, it was emphasized that Finnish CSOs, private sector actors, and other implementers of development policy should have more courage to analyze also if their practices potentially, and unintentionally, **can be restrictive** for civil society actors or the civic space in the particular contexts. One participant commented, for example, that large infrastructure projects can have negative consequences for the environment as well as for the human rights situation.

On the one hand, the workshop participants emphasized the need for collaboration between CSOs and the private sector, including increased possibilities for joint funding. On the other hand, representatives from CSOs raised critical views about the role of the private sector in development policy and in CSO–private sector collaboration. It was pointed out that it is not always in the interests of private companies to have a free and independent civil society that is able to raise critical voices and demand accountability. Yet, it was also emphasized that CSOs have a watchdog role to ensure accountability in company or government lead projects.

Relating to this, it was also emphasized that while it is important to pay attention to new possibilities provided by technology, the risks related to its impacts in an authoritarian context of large power imbalances are considerable, including the dangers of collecting and (mis)using digital data. Awareness of the intertwined political and economic interests between the companies and local authorities in contexts that lack democratic accountability is crucial and calls for supporting independent civil societies.
The possible **impact of private sector actors and private sector development in the global South on civil society and on the civic space** have not been discussed in sufficient depth. Multinational **companies** have a lot of economic leverage vis-à-vis governments in the global South, and they **can either promote or undermine human rights**. Private sector actors can collaborate with civil society actors, and by their own example, influence positively issues such as corruption, which hampers the enabling environment.

From the point of view of CSOs, the **goals and logics of private sector development** instruments are not properly outlined, including whether the goal is to promote Finnish enterprise opportunities or development policy objectives. Even if the idea is to promote both, real contradictions remain that have not been tackled with sufficient clarity. In particular, as noted by one interviewee, **the role of the private sector in relation to priority area four remains unclear**. While the relevance of the private sector in terms of climate change adaptation is relatively straightforward, picturing its contribution to democracy and peace is more complex. As a result, priority area four is quite invisible in the private sector instruments. It is **unclear whether the strengthening of civil society is expected to also concern private sector development funds**, and in which way.

Another point that causes confusion is the role of CSOs in relation to private sector development funds. Within the ministry, effort has been made during recent years to reinforce the inclusion of civil society actors in private sector development. The ministry has taken an active role to enhance the relationship and contacts between companies funded from these instruments and the CSOs. This process seems to have resulted from the exacerbation of tensions after the large budget cuts to CSO funding simultaneously to the large increase of e.g. Finnfund's budget under the previous government. As a result of the MFA's ownership steering, as well as Finnfund's own strategic thinking, **CSOs are now heard** when preparing policies, and Fingo has been incorporated into the Finnfund board.

**Picture:** Nokia phones being sold in Narok, Kenya, Milma Kettunen, Kehitys-lehti

The **funding criteria** for CSO cooperation and private sector funding is different. While CSOs criticize that the criteria demanded from companies is less strict in terms of development policy and cross-cutting objectives than what is demanded from CSOs, the criteria of own funding is stricter in private sector funds than those of CSO funds. This requirement makes it difficult for civil society actors to apply for these funds even if they are increasingly encouraged to assume a stronger role within this instrument. Yet from the company perspective, the development policy criteria attached to the funding seems excessive, provided that the MFA share is only a minor part of the private sector projects' total budgets.

At the project level, CSOs can apply for Finnpartnership funding as "support service projects" to collaborate with businesses. Some functioning examples exist, such as Kuukuppi and Sera Helsinki. There is also talk about forming consortia that would include CSOs, and events have been organized to promote this. Here, CSOs are mainly seen as a source of contextual understanding of global South contexts. This has also been incorporated into Business Finland's developing markets platforms (which replaced BEAM innovations instrument) and can be combined with Finnpartnership's support service projects. However, this brings back the issues of the **unclarity in defining the relationship between the goals of private sector development and those of Finland's general development policy**. To be able to participate, CSOs believe they are expected to support Finnish business as such, which they feel they cannot do since it might imply contradictions with their own core goals.

Another challenge in integrating civil society support to private sector development appears in the way **the instruments are designed for Finnish actors**. Therefore, the idea of supporting Southern civil societies does not come easily. Some initial good practices described in the interviews include Finnfund's cooperation with local actors, including CSOs, in the countries in which they operate, as well as the idea of incorporating CSOs in the lists of local contacts that Finnpartnership would offer to the companies during its new strategy period. In this, the role of Finnish embassies with Finnpartnership staff or Finnfund country offices is important. Some cooperation with CSOs as information sources have taken place also in evaluations, e.g., regarding subsidized credit (*Korkotukiluotto*).

According to interview data, this reflects an increasing awareness that **business ideas cannot just be developed in Finland, but need to respond to local perspectives and definitions regarding the needs**. Finnpartnership has been holding "SDG booster events", with the idea that local partners and local challenges are the basis on which companies can seek to provide solutions. This approach could make local organizations' role more useful for companies, which some interviewees suggested is the most effective way to promote this theme within the private sector development instruments.

All in all, the topic of civil society appears to be in a process of gradual inclusion, together with other development policy goals, to the minimum criteria required in private sector projects. Nonetheless, there seems to be a risk in the focus on the benefits that partnering with CSOs can bring to companies. Emphasizing the possibility of win-win solutions might make it difficult to understand and to openly discuss the ways in which corporate activity and private sector development can also negatively affect human rights, the independence of civil society and its enabling environment. When strengthening civil society is seen as a goal in itself, its role as an actor able to demand accountability for government but also corporate abuse is safeguarded.

**Key idea**: CSOs' expertise and added value for private sector development is on the rise, but the emphasis on win-win solutions seems to weaken the ability to analyze and consider the ways in which corporate activity and private sector development can also negatively affect human rights, civil society and its enabling environment.

**Recommendation**: Explicitly discuss the role of private sector development in the Guidelines on civil society, and define practical steps or minimum criteria for this sector.

**Recommendation**: Ensure that the impacts of corporate activity and private sector development on civil societies and civic space in the global South is analyzed, and written out in all relevant policies, country strategies and funding decisions.

**Recommendation**: Ensure that transitions to private sector cooperation do not endanger support for civil societies. In countries with a strong new private sector approach, continuous support for civil society should be assured.

## 6.5 Methodologies to foster civil society support

### 6.5.1 Cross-cutting principles vs. practical support

At the moment, the way staff in embassies and in the diverse regional and development policy units in Helsinki are able to integrate the strengthening of civil society in their work depends strongly on their personal experience and knowledge. This reveals the **need for clear practical instructions**, such as:

- What is expected and from whom?
- What kind of tools and minimum criteria should be used?
- Where to seek advice?

Simultaneously, the interview data revealed a broadly shared feeling among the ministry staff that considering all the different objectives and priorities of development policy is challenging as it is, and that **inclusion of more priorities or cross-cutting themes would demand more resources**, i.e., more staff. The increasing amount of priorities without new resources is a serious problem. Therefore, naming a new cross-cutting principle could be counter-productive, since a feeling of an overwhelming burden of perspectives to consider is commonly felt regardless of how committed the staff members are, and how important they consider the themes to be.

Instead, many interviewees expressed the **need for practical guidance**, and connecting the principles already stated in the 2017 policy tangibly into the work of different units. This needs to be thought through with the units in question.

Some **practical suggestions** to improve the usability of the guideline brought up by the interviewees included **the production of short one or two-page practical summaries or policy briefs** to help officials to absorb the key message better than a 10-page format. Additionally, **an online format, even a video or podcast**, could be helpful. The **importance of do-no-harm thinking was also mentioned, and the provision of minimum criteria was suggested**.

**The practical guidance needs to be targeted to particular actors**, because each actors' relationship with the CSOs – Finnish and Southern – is very different. The importance of strengthening *Southern* civil societies and their enabling space should be considered and explicitly written out in all other policies, e.g., for the private sector development.

Currently, the guidelines are mainly understood as guiding the work of CSOs who receive funding from the ministry, yet it is important that other actors, such as private companies also consider their role in this. Yet, different actors might need different tools, and detailed conditions must be complemented with strategic dialogue to make sure all beneficiaries of Finnish ODA understand the need to and the benefits of supporting civil societies and their enabling environment in the global South. In the case of private sector development, for example, this could mean revising the understanding of corporate social responsibility, and organizing discussions between the companies and Finnish or Southern civil society representatives.

One key point for ensuring the inclusion of civil society perspective in the diverse funding instruments, such as the multi-cooperation and private sector funds, which was brought up in the interviews, is the **quality group review of the projects** by the unit of sectoral policy. The country level is a similar key point for bilateral and multi-bi-cooperation. If the ministry is committed to strengthening civil societies and their enabling space across the development policy and cooperation, sufficient human resources must be guaranteed to make sure that these aspects are considered at a minimum level. This could mean opening of a new advisor position or giving more explicit emphasis to this aspect within the understanding of democracy promotion or HRBA.

### 6.5.2 Visualization and monitoring

Instead of seeing "guidance" as the only way of steering and pushing for a stronger mainstreaming of a particular aspect in the program and project work, some interviewees emphasized the importance of monitoring criteria in orienting the way strengthening civil societies and their enabling space is taken into account in all work. It could be systematically included in reporting guidelines, which would also make the impact visible and available to strategic scrutiny.

Discussing ways to enhance the implementation of the 2017 Guidelines, some interviewees raised the position of strengthening civil societies under priority area four (peaceful and **democratic societies**, previously three). Based on the research data, the role of civic space and the enabling space, as well as their central position in preventing the rise of authoritarianism, has not necessarily been emphasized enough within this priority. Democracy and civil society should not be seen as something separate, yet the focus is sometimes siloed in practice. **Clarifying the role of civil society strengthening under the current priority area and future work on the promotion of democracy and the rule of law is one tangible way of enhancing Finland's efforts in this regard**.

There is also much work done that goes under-reported. Some interviewees emphasized **the need to visibilize the work that is already being done** across the different policy instruments. As one interviewee put it, the important things are already written out in the 2017 guidelines but **information concerning the strengthening of civil society is dispersed, which makes it difficult to analyze and to use** in strategic planning. While the new Development Policy results reports are a significant improvement towards more consolidated information regarding the results of Finnish development policy, **the way the priorities – and indicators – are defined and structured for the moment make it difficult to effectively follow up the work done across the Ministry and the diverse actors supported by Finland**.

In the Theories of Change (2020), the results in terms of strengthening civil societies are measured only under outcome four of the priority area four: *The enabling environment for and capacity of civil society and persons in vulnerable positions to influence and to participate in decision-making has improved*. The indicators used to measure this outcome (*Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments; No. of countries that adopt and implement constitutional, statutory, and/or policy guarantees for public access to information*) are not linked with Finland's efforts but measure quantitative changes in all countries. Under the outcome, four outputs are measured using indicators (*no. of people who have taken part in decision-making; no. of developing country CSOs with improved capacity; no. of proposals for laws and policies that guarantee or improve freedom of speech, assembly, and association; no. of journalists, associated media personnel, trade unionists or human rights advocates supported*) are all quantitative and measure the number of activities in projects funded by Finland. All indicators thus focus on measuring the results of projects/programs funded by Finland. The results of the second main type of efforts defined in the civil society guidelines, namely **using policy dialogue and advocacy to promote civil society voice and the enabling environment that is undertaken as part of the regular work of diplomatic missions and diverse Ministry units at the country level and in international arenas, are not accounted for** in Finland's ToC and the results reports. The narrative part of the Results Report (2018) describes human and labor rights projects implemented with Finnish CSO funding. One example of what could be considered advocacy in international arenas is included, namely the mentioning of Finland's role in the UNESCO Executive Board, which has enabled promoting issues important to Finland, one of them being the freedom of speech. In other words, **as a whole, the strengthening of civil society as defined in the 2017 guidelines is, to an extent, under-reported as well as uncoordinated**.

Another problem comes from the fact that a major part of the work of strengthening civil societies, as described in the 2017 guidelines, happens through funding Southern CSOs through Finnish CSOs and, to a minor degree, INGOs. These organizations plan and monitor their programs according to their own goals and indicators, in line with the idea

that they are independent actors from the state. **It is difficult, in practice, to collect data and incorporate this into the result reports based on MFA's four (nowadays five) priority areas in which the strengthening of CSOs is not sufficiently clear**. The civil society unit has collaborated with Finnish CSOs to try and define good indicators and follow-up methods, but this has been challenging. Furthermore, this unit does not follow up the funding that is channelled through the funds for local cooperation and through Finland's support to multilateral organizations, including multi-bi-cooperation. This makes the monitoring and analysis of the results of this increasing flow of funding in terms of strengthening civil societies and their enabling environment relatively difficult.

Interestingly, one interviewee mentioned that the results of strengthening civil societies (*kansalaisyhteiskuntatuki*) are also considered under other priority areas: for example, the support provided to CSOs working on nature conservation is measured in the amount of forests protected. These are important results, yet they do not measure the strength of the independent civil society and its enabling environment *as a goal in itself*, but rather the CSOs' contribution to other policy goals, in this case those defined by Finland. This indicates that the **difference between measuring Finnish CSOs' work to specifically support Southern civil societies as democratic actors, and the other forms of project funding provided by Finnish CSOs to their Southern partners, remains rather blurry**. More qualitative data is included in the synthesis reports drafted by the CSO unit on the work of Finnish CSOs and INGOs, which supports the broader idea of effectiveness. In order to deepen and broaden the analysis to cover Finland's contribution to strengthening the role of Southern civil societies, the PYM synthesis report could feed into this analysis.

**Key idea**: Information concerning the strengthening of civil society, particularly its enabling environment as described in the 2017 Guidelines, is dispersed and partly invisible. Finland's current indicators measure primarily the results of CSO funding but give less information about the political support to enabling environment. This under-reporting makes it difficult to understand the gaps and to improve the effectiveness in terms of longer term impact.

**Recommendation**: Create practical guidance targeted to particular actors in the MFA to guarantee the inclusion of the goal of strengthening civil societies in the different levels of Finnish development policy.

**Recommendation**: Create indicators to measure the results of policy dialogue and advocacy to strengthen civil societies and in particular, their enabling environments. Integrate this aspect into reporting guidelines.

# 7 Conclusions and recommendations

In this Chapter, we draw general conclusions based on the analysis of the data collected in this study, and present recommendations concerning the more profound implementation of the 2017 Guidelines and ways to improve Finland's action to strengthen civil societies and their enabling environment in the global South. We begin by briefly summarizing the key conclusions of each chapter. Then, we revisit the main questions of the commission and continue with the main lessons learned, and conclude with the ongoing need to combine these perspectives in an attempt to support democratic societies.

## 7.1 Conclusions

The diverse roles of civil societies and the conditions under which they can perform such roles has been the subject of extensive academic and policy debates. We began this report by revising some of these debates, drawing attention to how the different notions imply different emphasis in what is being promoted and with what consequences. In chapter two, we concluded that the effective strengthening of civil society as an independent actor requires protecting and promoting its enabling environment. It is crucial to understand the contextual nature of civil society, and how it is intertwined with historical, global and national processes that might enable or restrict it. Shrinking civic space is an indicator and an enabler of rising authoritarianism.

Chapter three briefly presented the international policy framework that guides the work to support civil societies, and introduced some of the most important emerging discussions within the CSO development cooperation. Localization, decolonization and antiracism seek to change the systemic power relations in development cooperation. These debates were also present in the experiences of peer countries Denmark, Ireland and the Netherlands, presented in chapter four. In all these countries, civil society and enabling environments are considered crucial, both as independent goals and means to reach the SDGs, and current debates center on ways to increase Southern leadership in this work.

In chapters five and six, we moved to analyzing the applicability and implementation of the 2017 guidelines for civil society across Finnish development policy. Our findings show that the guidelines provide a normative description of the ways in which Finland can and

should strengthen civil societies through political advocacy and funding. Nonetheless, their impact is limited by two factors: First, no actor holds explicit responsibility for overseeing the application of the guidelines in their totality across Finnish development policy; second, guidance on how to implement the guidelines in practice is lacking.

As discussed in chapter five, most interviewees consider that the main mode in Finnish development policy to strengthen civil societies in the global South consists of the funding for Finnish CSOs, which can support their Southern partner CSOs financially but also in terms of capacity building, empowering vulnerable groups and enhancing the enabling environment through advocacy. In addition, Finland increasingly channels aid to civil society through multilateral agencies, but this support remains largely invisible, since Finland does not have a direct relationship with the local CSOs who might receive funding in this framework.

Related to the emphasis given in the peer countries to shifting leadership to Southern CSOs, the study finds that the Funds for Local Cooperation can be a highly strategic instrument to support and protect core functions of civil societies directly and flexibly, especially important in contexts of rising authoritarianism, e.g. in supporting HRDs. However, it places a heavy administrative burden on the embassies.

In chapter six, we focused on the second type of action defined in the Guidelines, namely strengthening civil societies and their enabling environment through policy dialogue and advocacy. The awareness and analysis of this work among the ministry officials seemed considerably weaker than that considering financial support, and was rarely brought up by the interviewees when asked about ways to strengthen civil societies in their work. The idea of partnership and inclusion of (mainly Finnish) CSOs in political processes emerged more naturally. Despite many good examples and commitments to include CSOs in multi-actor processes, the fact that this inclusion, its promotion and monitoring are not anyone's explicit responsibility might make it vulnerable to possible political changes, for example, in ministry leadership.

Despite the positive examples of policy dialogue to promote the voice and independence of civil society actors at the country level and within international organizations as described by the interviewees, this work appears unsystematic as it relies on the personal capabilities, knowledge and interests of individual officials. The same seems to be the case regarding the guidelines of HRDs. In relation to the country programs, the study finds that there is important variation in the way of strengthening civil society and the question of civic space is incorporated in the country programs. While the Guidelines attach a significant role for the embassies, as well as the units responsible for development policy, in defending civic spaces, concrete instructions regarding what this means in practice are lacking.

The relationship between strengthening civil societies and private sector development is unclear. There are demands for increasing collaboration, but while the benefits of win-win solutions have been emphasized, underlying tensions remain unresolved. It would be important to openly discuss also the possible negative impacts that corporate activity or new technologies can have on human rights and the civil society in contexts of highly unequal power relations.

Finally, the study concluded that information concerning the strengthening of civil society is dispersed and partly invisible. This is particularly the case with the strengthening of the enabling environment through policy dialogue and advocacy, since Finland's current indicators only measure the results of CSO funding. This under-reporting makes it difficult to understand the gaps and to improve the effectiveness in terms of longer-term impact.

## 7.2 Reflections

The main research question addressed the ways in which strengthening civil society is reflected in diverse instruments of Finland's development policies, and what are the main strengths and gaps herein. The analysis clearly showed that the main emphasis in Finland's efforts in this regard lies in the instruments for funding for CSOs administered by the civil society unit, particularly through Finnish CSOs. The second type of efforts defined in Finland's civil society guidelines, that is, the efforts to strengthen civil society and its enabling environment through policy dialogue and advocacy, is less understood, and the implementation remains uncoordinated.

The reflections by the interviewees mostly concerned the ways to strengthen civil societies by supporting civil society actors. Less common was to view civil society as a central component of democracy and human rights. The ways to advance the enabling environments for civil societies, thus addressing the threats to civic space by means of development policy, was less present in the reflections of the interviewees. From the point of view of Southern civil societies, the current Finnish policies imply mostly opportunities for NGOs, CSOs, and CBOs to partner with Finnish CSOs, and receive project funding and support in capacity building. To access core funding for organizational functioning or flexible funding for activism is more difficult for Southern CSOs.

Finland does undertake efforts to analyze civil society environments, as well as acts as a facilitator for debates between rights-holders and duty-bearers and provides protection for HRDs to some extent. However, direct involvement to influence regimes that limit the freedoms of expression, association and assembly or otherwise limit the independence of the civil society, or the provision of protection against repressive measures by authoritarian regimes is not central in the Finnish policy. In peer country interviews, the

importance of state level development policy dialogues in addressing repressive measures towards civic space in partner countries was mentioned, although no specific examples were given. Furthermore, while the Guidelines explicitly state that no activities under Finnish development policy should "impair the enabling environment", little analysis and reflection appears to be conducted on the potential negative effects of Finnish development activities on civil society or its enabling environment.

The Guidelines were valued in general and considered as a normative synthesis of the principles that should guide Finland's policy. However, outside KEO-30, the Guidelines are not commonly used in the work of the interviewed officials. The reason given was lack of time to engage in anything beyond one's core responsibilities. Several interviewees emphasized the need for much more practical guidance, tangible ways to translate the principles into practice in the everyday work by each of the actors mentioned in the policy.

The peer countries Denmark, Ireland and the Netherlands emphasized good practices towards an attempt to shift the leadership towards the global South. There, long-term programs, trust, and flexibility in funding were identified as good practices, whereas the challenges related to risk management. The actors in global South emphasized the need to support the existing forms of local organizing on the one hand, but also the analysis, advocacy and debates over the civic space on the other hand. They also stressed the importance of partnering with CSOs in the global North who can provide leverage, for instance, in arranging CSO-state dialogues.

Regarding the methodologies and tools to assess strengthening civil societies, the study focused on analyzing the current situation. The overall observation is that since civil society is only explicitly included under the outcomes of priority area four, in the current "Theory of Change" and results report, the results are only measured under outcome 4.4. The current indicators are quantitative and measure the number of activities supported by Finland and people participating in them. There are no process indicators nor reflection of the change produced in the society towards enabling environment in the broader political advocacy and dialogue. This reporting leaves a significant amount of work invisibilized, for example, in terms of the funding directed – or not – to strengthening civil societies through the increasing funding to multinational organizations. The under-reporting is a concern as it hinders analysis and learning that could enable Finland to improve the impact of the resources it channels through these organizations.

An interesting example from the peer countries to be consulted is the results framework and the ToC of the Netherlands program for supporting civil society. The international indicators, such as the CIVICUS monitor for civic space, provide some ground to draft the focus on where the contribution of Finnish development policy for the civic space or enabling environment could be found.

The wealth of methodologies and indicators used by Finnish CSOs in monitoring and assessing their outcomes and impacts regarding the strengthening of civil society were not included in this commission, which is why we are unable to assess the aspects and ways in which the work of Finnish CSOs in reality contributes to the strengthening of Southern civil societies. Currently, it appears that all work funded through Finnish CSOs appears in reports as contributing to "civil society strengthening", even though there is an important difference between, for example, providing projects of service provision and providing core funding to CSOs who engage in activist roles to defend democratic rights.

## 7.3 Recommendations

Here, based on the review of literature as well as analysis of the documents and interviews conducted for this commission, we will provide an extensive list of recommendations at different levels and for diverse actors in order to enhance the support for civil society and enabling environments by means of the Finnish development policy. All recommendations do not have clear targets, for instance regarding who should be responsible and with what resources the recommendation should be realized, as such details are out of the scope of the information received in this study. Therefore, we recommend the MFA to reflect on the recommendations, prioritize them, and allocate clear responsibilities and resources for implementation. Thus, the following recommendations are not divided by units, but are thematically clustered.

### 7.3.1 Recommendations for definitions and understandings

- Clarify what is meant by strengthening civil society, and explicitly combine the support to civil society organizations through diverse funding modalities and the influencing of enabling environments. Ensure that these are understood as complementary ways to support civil society.
- Identify diverse ways to support civil society in authoritarian contexts with restricted civic space, avoiding binary categorizations between service and advocacy (and consult ToCs of other donors). This could facilitate making civil society visible in the MFA ToC, especially under the PP3 (now 4), to identify multiple paths towards more democratic nations with stronger civil societies.
- Clarify the role of strengthening civil societies under the priority area of peaceful and democratic societies, to ensure that it is better incorporated in Finland's development policy and cooperation in this context.

- Engage in dialogue with other donor countries to harmonize the terminologies and vocabularies in order to facilitate the partner countries' understanding of donor ideas – here the OECD/DAC recommendation would be a useful tool. One forum for better donor coordination and commitment could be the International Task Team for CSO development effectiveness and enabling environment, as related to SDGs. Exchange on experiences, opportunities and challenges related to the mainstreaming civil society support in development policy would also be beneficial.
- Establish well-functioning collaborations especially with universities in the global South, initiatives such as Afrobarometer, and Finnish researchers to analyze and follow the developments of state governance, civil society, and their relationships in the selected contexts.
- Commission an additional, broad, and systematic study about the perceptions of global South CSOs on Finland's civil society support in the future.

### 7.3.2 Recommendations concerning the position of the Guidelines in the context of Finnish development policy

- Guidelines provide a good tool to be used in any aspect of Finnish development policy. However, to communicate well with those busy with other aspects, a one-page brief on what to take into account when considering civil society support should be produced. In addition, an online format – even a video or podcast – could be helpful.
- Clarify the meaning of the different priority areas and goals from the viewpoint of civil society. As long as strengthening civil society is openly stated merely within one of the priority areas, it does not function as a cross cutting theme as it should according to the Guidelines.
- The relationship between the Guidelines and the MFA overall development policy areas and results-frameworks should be harmonized in a way that explicitly shows how human rights-based approach, rule of law, democracy and strong civil society are intertwined.
  - Emphasize the promotion of a free and independent civil society and the importance of its enabling environment in the guidelines on HRBA, as well as in current and upcoming policies on democracy and the rule of law.
  - In the future, clarify the importance of civil society strengthening within the promotion of democracy and the rule of law.

- Ensure that the promotion of civic space is systematically incorporated in all relevant policies (e.g. for the private sector), advocacy documents and strategies in development cooperation, but also in Finnish foreign and security policy in general.
- Explicitly discuss the role of the private sector and its possible contradictory influence on civil societies and enabling environments in the Guidelines on civil society, and define practical steps or minimum criteria for this sector.
- Ensure that transitions to private sector cooperation do not endanger support for civil societies. In countries with a strong new private sector approach, continuous support to civil societies should be assured.
- Define minimum criteria to be used in order to consider the impacts on civil societies in different phases of political and strategic decision making, including on trade policy (both in Helsinki and the diplomatic missions).
- Ensure that all country programs consider the role and space of civil society within the political analysis. Include local CSOs (and Finnish CSOs working in the country) in drafting the contextual analysis and the preparation of the country strategies.

### 7.3.3 Recommendations concerning division of roles and responsibilities in implementing the Guidelines

- Develop clear mechanisms to ensure the continuity of civil society support despite the turnover of Ministers and staff.
- Ensure that the strengthening of civil societies through both political work and funding are operationalized within the Ministry by defining responsibilities for each task among relevant units/departments.
- Explicitly allocate responsibilities for different units for the different aspects of the work relating to strengthening of civil societies described in the Guidelines. The implementation of all the aspects of strengthening civil societies needs to be explicitly described at the concrete level of responsibilities and tasks.
- Make sure that all units at all levels of the MFA engaged in development policy acknowledge and are aware of their responsibility in strengthening civil societies. Enhancing the mainstreaming of this goal requires adequate resources.

- Establishment of institutionalized groups or networks, or a task force formed across different Ministry departments, to take forward the civic space agenda in all aspects of development policy.
- Ensure that the responsibility to systematically raise the importance of an independent civil society and its enabling environment through political dialogue is explicitly incorporated in the responsibilities (task descriptions) of ambassadors and heads of mission, as well as diplomatic staff.
- Define and divide responsibilities for advocacy work in international forums regarding civil society thematics among different units and officials in Helsinki.
- In addition to its role in administering CSO funding, the expert role of the Civil Society Unit should be recognized, strengthened and resourced in order to allow it to support the implementation of the guidelines throughout the Ministry, particularly regarding the promotion of the enabling environment.
- Create ways to coordinate and monitor the integration of civil society thematics across development policy, for example by resourcing an advisory position in the civil society unit or by establishing a network of focal points.

### 7.3.4 Recommendations for the implementation of the Guidelines

- In addition to the normative description of the ways in which Finland can strengthen civil societies through political work and funding, define practical steps (e.g. in bullet points) and minimum criteria for each actor involved. Provide guidance to each actor regarding the practical implementation in their respective work area.
- The practical guidance needs to be targeted to particular actors, taking into consideration each actors' particular relationship with the CSOs – Finnish and Southern.
- A key point for ensuring the inclusion of civil society perspective in the diverse funding instruments, such as the multi-cooperation and private sector funds, is the quality group review of the projects by the unit of sectoral policy. The country level is a similar key point for bilateral and multi-bi-cooperation.
- The Guidelines attach a significant role for the embassies in defending the space of civil societies. Yet, the demands and concrete instructions for the embassies regarding this are lacking. Systematize the role of the embassies at the concrete level and provide the embassies with concrete instructions and support in this task.

- The embassies should, in addition to providing local funding for civil society actors, systematically follow the civic space in the countries and influence the developments through diplomacy and policy dialogue.
- Experiment with good practices to support Southern civil society actors, for example by conducting thematic multi-actor workshops where duty-bearers and rights-holders come together.
- Act as an enabler for Southern civil society voices, for instance support them in participating in international fora or provide "prestige" to local dialogue (the local decision makers are more likely to participate if Northern representatives are present).
- Ensure that FLC funds are strategically allocated to civil society actors, including human rights defenders, who focus on protecting the civic space and the freedoms of expression, association and assembly and/or represent marginalized groups. Strengthen the use of the FLC in non-partner countries in order to support civil society under authoritarian pressure.
- Ensure that flexible instruments (e.g. FLC) actually exist for immediate protection and support for activists under threats, and make sure that embassies have resources (assigned person & funds) to do that.
- The Guidelines provide a wide definition of actions and actors constituting civil society in the global South. Yet, the funding is mostly channelled to CSOs. It would be beneficial to explore ways in which other kinds of actors, such as activists, social movements or journalists mentioned in the Guidelines could be supported, given the current legislative constraints.
- Be more explicit that the funding for Finnish CSOs can also be used for core-funding for Southern CSOs in addition to project funding, and strongly encourage the Finnish CSOs to use it this way, particularly to support advocacy-focused CSOs such as human rights organizations.
- Make sure that all resources channelled through Finnish CSOs strengthen the capacities and leadership of Southern partners, empower vulnerable groups and contribute to strengthening the enabling environment e.g. through advocacy.
- Identify ways to ensure that Finland's funding to multilateral organizations, including the development banks, is used to strengthen civil society's independent role and capacity beyond mere project implementation.

- A successful implementation of the Guidelines requires continuous dialogue with the partner countries but also with the Finnish CSOs who possess vast experience and expertise on diverse ways of supporting civil society. The MFA should systematically incorporate their views based on dialogues on the dynamics of civil society in different contexts, their best practices, and tools to measure the contributions. However, it should be clear that if the CSOs are invited to participate, their participation should have a real impact.
- Conduct, in collaboration with CSOs and research institutes from the global South and the Finnish CSOs, in-depth analysis of the dynamics of state, civil society and civic space in the partner countries in order to achieve contextualized understandings on how to best support civil society (or use the ones produced by others, e.g. the EU).
- The current international trends of decolonizing, localizing, antiracism and shifting the power towards the global South should be included in the implementation of the Guidelines in such a way that the leadership of partnerships and the prioritization of agendas should take place with the Southern actors considered as agents in their own environments rather than as implementers of Finnish development policy or a program of Finnish CSOs.
- Be alert to state and private sector activities in partner countries – including those of Finnish actors – that can hinder civil society action or restrict civil society. Actively commit to the do-no-harm principle.

### 7.3.5 Recommendations concerning evidence-based policy

- Create indicators to measure the results of policy dialogue and advocacy to strengthen civil societies and, in particular, their enabling environments. Integrate this aspect into reporting guidelines.
- While the pluralist and open civil society in Finland should be valued and celebrated, the civil society support for Southern civil societies should be contextualized in cultures, forms of governance, and societal dynamics. Therefore, evidence of what kinds of support works and where should be produced and collected especially with researchers from the global South.
- Civil society support should be knowledge-based. Researchers from the global South should be more systematically involved in supporting knowledge-based development policy and planning based on up-to-date and in-depth knowledge of civil societies.

- The evidence-based policy for supporting civil society and enabling environments should go beyond using evaluations, which play an important role in assessing certain interventions but rarely capture more long-term processes of evolvement of citizen–state relations and political systems, which are long and complex processes of institutional change.
- The MFA could consider investigating the effects and impacts of multilateral funding (UN, IFIs, EU) to civil societies in partner countries.
- A study of the best practices on civil society support, in continuation of this study, should be conducted on the views of civil society actors in the global South that collaborate with actors that implement Finland's development policy.

# Attachments

## Attachment 1. List of Interviewees

| No. | Institution |
|---|---|
| 1 | MFA, Embassy of Finland in Kenya |
| 2 | NAFAN, Nepal |
| 3 | FCA, Kenya |
| 4 | MFA Ireland, Civil Society Unit |
| 5 | Partnership Fida International and Full Gospel Churches, Kenya |
| 6 | MFA, KEO-20 |
| 7 | MFA, ASA-02 |
| 8 | MFA, KEO-30 |
| 9 | MFA, ALI-02 |
| 10 | MFA, KEO-10 |
| 11 | MFA, KEO-02 |
| 12 | Fida International, Kenya |
| 13 | Fingo |
| 14 | MFA, KEO-90 |
| 15 | MFA Netherlands, Department of Social Development |
| 16 | KEO-90 |
| 17 | MFA, KEO-20 |
| 18 | MFA, KPO-30 |
| 19 | MFA, KEO-20 |
| 20 | MFA, KEO-30 |
| 21 | MFA, KEO-20 & POL-40 |
| 22 | MFA, KEO-02 |
| 23 | MFA, KEO-20 |
| 24 | MFA Denmark, democracy and human rights department for humanitarian action, civil society and engagement |
| 25 | Fingo |
| 26 | MFA |

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