

**Using ICT as strategic tools to enhance CSOs’
capacity for collaborating with government**

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1. CSOs as a growing actor

In recent days, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have been playing significant roles in social innovation and global governance as a growing actor. In other words, importance of CSOs' activities has grown steadily, so much so that other sectors (e.g. governments, international organizations, etc.) can no longer ignore them and creation of partnerships between CSOs and government has become a worldwide trend. Given the fact that the government no longer serves as an only actor to provide public services, CSOs has been already playing active roles in the related area by closely cooperating with government in many of Asia-Pacific countries. Likewise many governments welcome participation of CSOs in formalizing various policies. International Development Finance Institutions like the World Bank clearly address that CSOs can play crucial roles to alleviate poverty and encourage the governments from their developing members countries to cooperate with CSOs at every stage of the development work.

However, it is true that various initiatives and efforts with regard to current cooperation between CSOs and government are still under the stage to be further developed, taking into account that those results may not always end in the manners that both parties can satisfy. For example, in the case that CSOs participate into formulation of a particular policy, CSOs may show their disappointment by stating that their recommendations and suggestions are not properly considered in the final outputs. Government may expect more constructive and productive discussions with CSOs other than being criticized by them. This is due to the fact that both Government and CSOs still need some knowledge, experiences, and capacity, to effectively work together. For instance, CSOs sometimes misunderstand and/or misuse the opportunities and even lack of

capacity to effectively engage into policy dialogue with government. In other words, some of them simply do not have enough skills to analyze the policy and present alternative suggestions instead of criticisms, while others are not familiar with the process and/or system that the government proceeds the work. On the other hand, government themselves may still lack of capacity and experiences to work with CSOs in basic level, such as the ways to identify the groups to work together, to create/maintain fruitful relationships with them, to share the necessary information at each stage where collaboration takes place, to deal with their requests/demands, etc.

Under the circumstance, rapidly developing information and communication technologies (ICTs) in our society can contribute to improvement of such the situation. It even affects various aspects of CSOs' operations as a matter of fact. For example, in fifteen years ago, it simply took costs and time for them to communicate with others because they had to rely on postage and/or fax as major tools of communications. Such the communication costs burdened CSOs whose financial resources were mostly limited especially in the case that they needed to communicate with those who were based in remote areas, which also resulted not only to restrict extent and frequency of their communications due to lack of the budget, but also to make their work delay simply because it took much time to get the replies. However, as a result of the rapid development of ICTs, CSOs have been able to save the costs and time for communications dramatically such as by using email and internet, and it has even increased quality of their work by making it possible to work speedy and efficient manners.

2. Key factors to develop partnership between CSOs and government

As already written, although both CSOs and government still look for the ways to effectively work together throughout various initiatives and efforts, the current situation will be more or less improved if both parties work for meeting at least the following conditions at initial stage where cooperation takes place.

-Sharing common goals and objectives of cooperation

Without sharing common goals and objectives why both parties need to

cooperate, the substances resulting from such the cooperation would not end in satisfaction for both of them because it happens them to forward cooperation with having different expectations from the beginning. For example, it supposes that there is an opportunity to discuss development strategy of one country between CSOs and government. The dialogue tends to be confrontational if CSOs perceive the opportunity to influence their voices and conduct advocacy such as by presenting their demands to formalize and/or improve particular policies, while the venue is simply to exchange information with various stakeholders including CSOs from the government's point of view.

-Sharing common understanding regarding roles of each party

Even though both parties agree on common goals and objectives to cooperate each other, it will be crucial to clarify the roles that each of them is supposed to play at the process they proceed a series of the work. In other words, without clear definition of each own work, confusions occur when they engage into actual work and it may heavily effect on accomplishing the goals and objectives that have been already specified. For example, when a local government financially supports a CSO to implement a project that provides a primary health care service to the poor, roles of the CSO as an implementer should be clearly differentiated from those of the government as a donor at the stages to design, implement, monitor, and evaluate the project, otherwise the project may not end in success such as because the targeted beneficiaries cannot access to the services properly, according to the original plan.

-Building enough credibility to work as partners

If both parties cannot create and maintain trustworthy relationship, there is danger that cooperation between both parties becomes "superficial", which means that processing the work is more prioritized than its quality. For example, when CSOs are given an opportunity to participate into a policy formulation, one major comment arising from CSOs is that government consults with them only as a "pose" to appeal its transparency and accountability to broader public due to the fact that government does not take

their suggestions and recommendations in the end. In order to avoid such the situation, it is essential that both parties should make efforts to build credibility, which makes them possible to respect each own expectations, views, positions, roles, and so on, when both parties work on the previous two issues listed above.

Obviously the above three factors are very fundamental and there are still a number of the issues that should be done in order to promote truly functional cooperation. Furthermore, meeting the above “requirements” would not be even easy work at actual implementation levels, taking into account that types and/or forms of cooperation are diversified depending on the issues to work on, actors who involve there, areas/ countries where cooperation takes place, etc. Therefore, the concrete guidelines to work them out may not exist from practical point of view. Instead, what can be done at least is that both parties should have opportunities to sit down and consider the three issues listed above before engaging into actual work, and then make any efforts to agree on the overall direction and/or framework of the collaborating work. By doing so, it must at least contribute for improvement of critical issues that both parties are currently facing to promote truly functional cooperation.

3. Legitimacy, transparency, and accountability

As already mentioned, although both CSOs and government still face critical issues that need to be solved in order to effectively cooperate each other, the focus here will be put in how CSOs can challenge them, taking into account that existing studies seem to more concentrate on the work done by government than that of CSOs. Within the context, enhancing CSOs’ legitimacy, transparency, and accountability can be one important area that CSOs should challenge.

According to Dr. L. David Brown at the Hauser Center for Non-profit Organizations in Harvard University, they can be perceived as follows.

-Accountability refers to the ways in which CSOs are held responsible for

their actions by diverse stakeholders.

-Transparency refers to processes, procedures, etc. by which CSOs disclose information about their resources, activities, and impacts.

-Legitimacy refers to perception by key stakeholders that the existence, activities, and impact of CSOs are justifiable in terms of central social values¹.

Taking into account that CSOs are indisputably developing into a specific sector as already mentioned, the flip side of social recognition of CSOs is society's demand that they demonstrate legitimacy, transparency, and accountability of their existence, mission, activities, and so on. Sharing with members, donors, and other stakeholders information on, for example, whether donations and grants to CSOs are being used appropriately and whether their services are effectively delivered to targeted beneficiaries with good qualities. If CSOs are able to respond to demands of the stakeholders including government by establishing processes and procedures to properly disclose such the information like their missions, activities, and impact, it will contribute them for acquiring broad perception that they are justifiable in terms of central social value. Noting this state of affairs, enhancing CSOs' legitimacy, transparency, and accountability will increase their own credibility toward other stakeholders and it will help CSOs obtain social recognition that CSOs can surely play crucial roles in social innovation and global governance, which can be a "basement" to create partnerships with others.

4. Using ICTs as strategic tools

CSOs should put particular focus on establishing an information management system by strategically utilizing ICTs because it can be one of the key factors to enhance their legitimacy, transparency, and accountability. For instance, CSOs can strengthen some aspects of their work, like it is exemplified below, if they are able to establish the

¹ For example, according to Dr. Brown, legitimacy could be grounded in representing a membership, or in demonstrated expertise on a topic, or by speaking for widely-held values, or by complying with legal requirements.

effective information management system.

-Effectively responding to stakeholders

Through the information management system, CSOs can improve the ways that they communicate with both internal and external stakeholders including government in timely and efficient manners. For example, if such the system functions properly, CSOs can respond to demands and requests from various stakeholders, such as members, donors, partners, at all the stages of their operations.

-Proactively disseminating information about themselves

The system also makes it possible for CSOs to proactively disseminate the information with regard to their resources, activities, outputs, impact, etc. In other words, through dissemination of such the information like the annual report, financial report, publications, result of evaluation regarding their projects, it can be the effective tool in approaching to various constituency and stakeholders and help them acquire social recognition in terms of their legitimacy.

If CSOs succeed to proactively utilize ICTs by establishing the information management system which at least functions in the above ways, it will contribute for improvement of their operations to be more open, responsive, and justifiable, than ever before, from constituency's and/or stakeholders' point of view. In other words, strategic integration of ICTs in their operations can more or less contribute for enhancement of their own legitimacy, transparency, and accountability, which makes them possible to be ready for challenging the critical issues and/or situation that CSOs themselves are currently facing in order to promote truly functional cooperation.

It is therefore strongly suggested that CSOs should come up with concrete strategies and action plans to integrate ICTs as strategic tools in every aspect of their operations. However, in order to do so, given the fact that CSOs may still need external supports in some aspects, such as to acquire technical knowledge and expertise, financial resources,

and so on, active support of other sectors, particularly the government, regarding the initiatives and efforts to be made by CSOs are definitely needed because it can say that such the supports will return to them as their own benefits in the end because CSOs can strengthen capacity to become their valuable partners.