From activists to managers: Learnings about growth, change and challenge in civil society organisations in Timor-Leste

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Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have had to constantly redevelop their governance strategies throughout their existence in Timor-Leste. This paper looks at some of the challenges that organisations are currently facing and suggests potential ways forward to guide strong governance through internal capacity development now that the CSO environment is again changing. The myriad of challenges CSOs face can be hard to navigate at times. As Basáñez (2010) states, a deeper understanding of history, institutions and conditions unique to Timor-Leste can provide a more in-depth perspective linking research and theory to more viable, sustainable governance solutions. The purpose of this paper is to help provoke discussion around how to best support sustainable development through CSOs in Timor-Leste. Drawing upon research, projects, and most strongly 'on the ground' experience, this paper is derived from our work together with CSOs within Timor-Leste and reflects our personal assessments of what is most useful to CSOs in strengthening governance. Note that we use the term CSO rather than Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) as in Timor-Leste some organisations are community-based but not registered as NGOs.

CSOs fulfil a number of roles in Timor-Leste, such as service provision, advocacy, public education, network building, and monitoring of State programmes. In recent years, a number of CSOs have experienced challenges as they have tried to balance these various roles, as well as sustaining their organisation. Challenges include how CSOs are adapting to a shifting donor environment; how to enable different roles to ensure both strong governance and accountability; and how visions for accountability and justice can be realised. For the purpose of this paper, governance by definition 'focuses on issues of policy and identity, rather than the issues of day-to-day implementation of programmes… governance requires the creation of structures and processes which enable the CSO to monitor performance and remain accountable to its stakeholders' (Tandon 1995, 2).

In 2013 a number of the donors who have been committed to long-term core support to CSOs, including strengthening of organisations and advocacy work, are withdrawing from, or distancing support for Timor-Leste. Many of these donor organisations started their support to Timor-Leste during the Indonesian Occupation, as a gesture of solidarity. Now, in a development climate that increasingly demands results, it has become difficult for these donors to defend work where results are more difficult to identify. Yet donors with a long-term view on sustainable development, commitment to a strong civil society, and attention to institutional strengthening are exactly the kind of donor partners that should be actively involved in Timor-Leste. Less flexible donors, those driven by strong policy at home will not have the same impact as flexible donors. As de Tray states:

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> The fact that donor agencies are in service to poor countries but accountable to, and financed by rich countries creates a weird set of conflicting incentives that often produce programs that satisfy neither paymasters nor poor countries (de Tray 2011, 7).

This juxtaposition presents some key questions for consideration. For CSOs in Timor-Leste – should they be doing more to demonstrate the importance of their work and the changes that are created as a result of their work? All too often monitoring and evaluation is used as an exercise to report to donors, rather than to reflect on the difference/change the CSO is making in its context. Unfortunately, this orientation to change is not as strong as it should be in some CSOs. The sense of activism has been lost with many CSOs becoming focused on service provision. Monitoring the changes created and explaining these to interested parties (not just donors but also government, other stakeholders, and most importantly individuals) should be a key aspect of the work of any justice-oriented organisation. This is an aspect of advocacy – something that should be important to activists.

Who governs organisations?

Governance of CSOs has not been given sufficient attention in Timor-Leste. By governance, we mean high-level oversight of an organisation and its staff through a structure like a Board of Directors. Governance of CSOs usually is not considered until there is an organisational issue that requires a high-level decision like financial misconduct, senior recruitment, or holding Annual General Meetings. Many CSOs in Timor-Leste have a Board that hardly functions leading to donors playing some sort of governance role in their partner CSO. For example, donors may interact with CSOs regarding planning with funds over the year, human resource policies, hiring processes, and execution of resources. These are areas that elsewhere are considered by Boards. But donors may step into this role either because there is no Board, or because the donor must be involved in these processes due to its own internal requirements. If CSOs feel that donors intervene too much in their internal affairs, then CSOs need to determine what they can do to strengthen their processes and structures to demonstrate this to donors. There is a need to look more creatively at governance structures and oversight in the Timor-Leste context. If we look at CSO Boards at the national level, many of the same people are on many Boards, which is unsustainable but it also brings into question individual's suitability to provide effective governance to such a vast number of CSOs. There is also a tendency to have people from other CSOs on Boards, but not to bring in people from other sectors. Involving different sectors could be useful in terms of increasing competency levels, the pool of people, bringing in new ideas, and perhaps finding new funding streams. CSOs may not need Boards if they are getting good governance from other sources, or there could be a way to create some kind of unified structure to provide oversight to a number of CSOs. Strong governance ensures the sustainability of CSOs and can determine whether their organisations principally provide service provision or a critical voice of civil society.

As a member-based networkm, FONGTIL has a multi-level governance system and its structure and experience raises a number of questions about CSOs and how they manage themselves and change. FONGTIL has faced challenges meeting the wide array of needs from members whilst also responding to requirements and perspectives of donors. To what extent is it appropriate for donors to influence the programming and direction of an umbrella organisation, which is supposed to get its mandate from members? While this is a question of governance, it is also a question of economics – to be more member-focussed and more independent; the organisation would also have to adjust to a much smaller budget (as donor funds make up a large part of the budget). FONGTIL has also struggled with tensions around how much it should programme through the Secretariat and how much should be undertaken by members. In recent years, the FONGTIL Secretariat has become more engaged in programming, partly because international donors find FONGTIL a useful mechanism through which to programme and achieve some level of connection to district-based work. In this way FONGTIL helps donors to manage the burden and complications of working with civil society, but this shift of focus to programming reduces the resources to fulfil the core mandate – Advocacy, Facilitation, Communication and Capacity Building. It also indicates a

weakness in the relationships and responses of some donors with CSOs. FONGTIL has a relationship with donors who at various times have pushed and pulled the organisation in different directions impacting on strategic planning, contractual obligations, capacity, and ultimately on both management and governance. Donor accountability and contractual targets deflect the organisation's focus and accountability upwards, away from its membership base, to which it is meant to be accountable. As donors step in there is short-term adoption of systems and direction, but once the donor is no longer providing funds or staff change, systems and direction shift. As the umbrella organisation FONGTIL should be exemplary and provide support for its member CSOs on good governance practices but FONGTIL has maintained a focus on programming due to a high dependency on donor funding to cover operating costs which have lead to short term funding opportunities leaving the organisation highly vulnerable to donor demands.

Visions for justice and accountability

Donors need to consider how they look at change and results, timelines for measuring change, and how they resource their work if they want to contribute to strong, sustainable CSOs. In Timor-Leste, so much information is exchanged in ways that do not easily translate to the written word and even less to log frames. Staff in CSOs struggle to communicate their work in ways that are immediately useful to audiences outside of Timor-Leste. Donors often do not sufficiently resource their own work to allow for the time and accompaniment needed to produce information related to results, which can be compelling and useful to actors outside of Timor-Leste. There is increasing thinking that development actors must be much more open to looking at the complexity of development and the non-linear path which development often follows. This means looking both at planned and unplanned changes, which have resulted from their work. As donors become increasingly focussed on effectiveness and value for money, there are more demands on CSOs in terms of being able to manage and report on their work, particularly in terms of finances and monitoring and evaluation. In 2013 the 'flexible' donors are withdrawing and the remaining larger donors require more rigour that will in turn require a higher level of management skills from staff and more fixed processes within CSOs. As CSOs in Timor-Leste are heavily dependent on donor contributions to function, a major influence on CSO governance and management comes from western donors. If donors are not using the right models and incentives then their increasingly rigid requirements will have a negative impact on CSO governance and processes leading to a decline in organisational capacity which is the opposite effect of what donors are trying to achieve. De Tray (2011) argues that capacity stripping is the biggest challenge for CSOs in Timor-Leste as donors are using the wrong incentives, wrong models, wrong timeframes, and working on the wrong capacity problems.

Related to the issue of demonstrating change/results, while some of this comes from how people understand change and present information, some of the challenge is linked to a lack of belief in accountability. There may be an attitude of not needing to account for what a person or an organisation does. Some of this may be due to a sense of strength and victory – now that Timor-Leste is independent, CSOs and individuals do not need to answer to outside actors. Some of this may be related to historical and cultural issues, such as the strong links between civil society and clandestine networks and ways of working during the Indonesian Occupation. Some of this is related to power and privilege, with information being a way to protect this. As Sommers highlights, the way political leaders manage and share information needs to be improved. In a society where sharing information is highly valued, leaders appear to have placed a high priority on controlling information flow. At its worst, lack of accountability can lead to corruption and abuse, and is corrosive to organisations and individuals. In Trocaire's experience, organisational secrecy is one of the biggest challenges facing Timor-Leste CSOs. CSOs need to recognise that they have a responsibility to be accountable to beneficiaries. Funds are raised on behalf of particular groups, but to what extent do CSOs report back to these groups on the progress being made, get feedback or receive criticism and requests for change? CSOs will demand that government is more transparent, but we also need to consider how transparency could strengthen civil society, take for example the Istanbul Principles

on Development Effectiveness[2] which offer some ways forward on this. Trocaire's partners, who have strengthened their processes to consult with communities, have reported that they feel that their work is stronger, and this comes through in their ability to demonstrate the changes being created through their work.

Through our experience some interesting points about leadership and capacity can be further drawn out. Different models of leadership to ensure good governance and accountability of CSOs may need to be considered. Decades of resistance have influenced how the Timorese lead and understand leadership. The environment in Timor-Leste has changed over the past 10 years with different social norms being influenced by external actors. Western concepts of good leadership (frequently advocated by donors), include negotiation, open communication, compromise, etc. while concepts of good leadership within the Timorese context may include being strong willed. Some of these tensions regarding leadership styles can both strengthen and undermine best practice development methodologies, for example those outlined in the Istanbul Principles. As a 2010 USAID funded Values Study on Timor-Leste highlights, 'although Timorese believe debate to be good, they are not fully ready to accept the costs it may bring or, likewise, they believe that agreement cannot exist where there is debate' (Basáñez 2010, 22). This is just one example of some of the underlying culturally specific beliefs that impacts on the governance and accountability of CSOs. Donors need to take these cultural beliefs and Timor-Leste's history into account when working with CSOs to ensure meaningful sustainable development can be achieved.

It is also worthwhile to consider whether individuals and CSOs want to change their governance strategies in the way that Western donors are demanding – strengthening leadership and accountability. It may be the case that in some ways they indicate that they want to change, as they seek donor support but at a more fundamental level they do not want to. This will then result in ongoing difficulties between donors and the CSO, which will then struggle to meet financial management and reporting requirements of donors. This may come to be seen as a lack of capacity of the CSO, but maybe it is a reflection of different priorities. CSOs need time to develop capacity, to improve the quality of work, to rethink purpose and to organise how to do their work - growing horizontally, continuously improving and evaluating. If CSOs do have different priorities, they should make different choices about the resources they need to do their work, and where they seek these resources. In some cases, donor funded projects may be seen more as a way of seeking livelihoods for staff than as an opportunity to bring about change, increased justice, reduced poverty, etc. If a CSO decides that it wants to improve it needs to put people with the right skills in the right positions. Programme management and finance are particularly key. Unfortunately, CSOs do not always match skills to positions. In some cases, this is about identity of the CSO – we want people who are like us/from the same background/are activists (not managers). In some cases, this is because people are put into positions due to connections or because of a perceived need that the person has for a job (livelihood) or for an opportunity for learning. In some cases, this is because the CSO cannot find the time or the process to conceive of new roles and put people into these new roles. Trocaire has seen a number of partners struggle with time, energy, and knowledge management as skilled field workers are filling management positions stuck close to their computer rather than being out doing what they do best or even if there are resources available to hire a Programme Manager CSOs may not do this. This is the result of other more complex issues of organisational culture and understanding about how individuals want to do their work.

Conclusion

Organisational change is a constant challenge in any sector, in any nation. CSOs are no different in that they face a continuously changing environment and their success depends on whether or not they have the ability to reassess and change together with their environment. CSOs in Timor-Leste are becoming service providers for both the government and/or donors because these CSOs lack the ability to reassess their

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[2] Istanbul Principles (International Framework on CSO Development Effectiveness) 2010, Open Forum's Global Assembly in Istanbul, Turkey, September 28-30, 2010, , http://cso-effectiveness.org/istanbul-principles,067, viewed June 2013.

objectives and change. Government and donors need to understand that CSOs have to change to remain true to their values and stay relevant to their stakeholders, and this may mean that CSOs do not use the same governance structures and strategies that donors have and expect. In the past ten years in Timor-Leste, according to Hunt (2008) CSOs had to constantly reassess their roles in the rapidly changing context, and adjust their activities and relationships requiring them to make frequent changes in their organisational structures in response. As in the past, Timor-Leste's activist CSOs need to reassess their strategies in order to define the path that's best for them in the current context in Timor-Leste or risk becoming service providers. There may be ways that donor support can continue to build capacity rather than strip capacities and distract organisations from their own strategic focus, but this requires donors to define capacity as more than a human resource or technical skill and to look at more than just value for money and short-term results.

Potential ways to strengthen CSO capacity

Based on our experience, consultations and learning exercises (such as evaluations), and discussion during presentation at the TLSA conference, some potential ways forward can be identified including:

- CSOs that self-assess their development needs are able to provide and seek capacity development inputs that best suit their organisational needs. They are also better able to assess what they are already doing well and what needs to change. They can then use this information in negation with donors, and donors should request and fund these types activities.
- CSOs function better when they share information internally. For example, program staff need to understand how their work is financed and obligations related to grants so that they can plan and implement their activities within budget.
- It is useful to develop Strategic Plans that include organisational development and meaningful benchmarks to track this development and Donors need to prioritise funding for the internal organisational development of CSOs.
- Donors and CSOs need to ensure that projects are set up to enable sustainability – for example by including costs for severance pay and employee benefits.
- CSOs must consider the Istanbul Principles for effective CSOs and consider how these can be implemented in practice.
- Donors and CSOs should try to use more creative approaches to M&E and especially indicators which could better capture the characteristics of their work, rather than only measuring the work from externally driven indicators, often created to meet donor requirements.
- Donors and CSOs need to discuss and understand organisational capacities (of both the Donor and CSO) and these should be communicated and monitored regularly.

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