

Discussion Paper

No. 135

October 2012

Strengthening civil society?

Reflections on international
engagement in fragile states

Frauke de Weijer and Ulrika Kilnes

www.ecdpm.org/dp135

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Acknowledgements

This discussion paper is based on a study commissioned by Loes Lammerts for the Civil Society Division of the Social Development Department (DSO/MO), Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Additional insight for the study was provided by Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs colleagues, including Marion Derckx (Head of Division), Ilse de Jonge, Irma van Dueren, and Jonatan Bartling of DSO/MO; Karin Boven of the Fragile States and Peacebuilding Unit; and Corina van der Laan of the Human Rights, Emancipation, Good Governance and Humanitarian Aid Department. Insights were also exchanged with Maria Derks, Deborah Wright and Rosan Smits of the Conflict Research Unit of Clingendael Institute.

The initial desk research was undertaken from October to December 2011 by the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM), Maastricht. The production of this paper was supported by Simone Görtz, Stephanie Colin and Andrew Sherriff. Volker Hauck, Jean Bossuyt, Jan van Heukelom and Niels Keijzer provided valuable comments on the methodology and feedback on internal drafts of the document.

Any errors in this paper remain those of the authoring team. This paper should not be taken to represent the views of ECDPM.

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Acronyms

| | |
|--------|---|
| AfDB | African Development Bank |
| ADE | Aide à la Décision Économique |
| APFO | Africa Peace Forum |
| APSA | African Peace and Security Architecture |
| AUC | African Union Commission |
| CSO | Civil Society Organisation |
| DAC | Development Assistance Committee (OECD) |
| DFID | Department for International Development (UK) |
| DIE | Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik |
| DRC | Democratic Republic of Congo |
| DRIS | Développement, Réhabilitation, Intégration, Sécurité |
| DSO/MO | Civil Society Division of the Social Development Department (The Netherlands) |
| ECDPM | European Centre for Development Policy Management |
| EPLO | European Peacebuilding Liaison Office |
| EU | European Union |
| FLEGT | Forest Law Enforcement, Government and Trade |
| FORSC | Forum for the Strengthening of Civil Society |
| GOVNET | DAC Governance Network |
| GSDRC | Governance and Social Development Resource Centre |
| INGO | International Non-Governmental Organisation |
| IOB | Inspectie Ontwikkelingssamenwerking en Beleidsevaluatie |
| MDG | Millennium Development Goal |
| NEPAD | The New Partnership for Africa's Development |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organisation |
| Norad | Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation |
| ODA | Official Development Assistance |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| WDR | World Development Report |
| WRR | Wetenschappelijke Raad Voor Het Regeringsbeleid |

Executive Summary

Recognition of the importance of civil society has risen on the international agenda in recent years. Increasingly civil society organisations are an integral part of policy negotiations, at both the national and the supra-national levels. In aid effectiveness fora, the involvement of civil society has gained momentum. In addition, the number, capacity and legitimacy of southern civil society organisations has increased substantially in past decades. Within the area of international development cooperation, fragile states have emerged as a particular point of attention, with explicit recognition that different approaches are necessary to support these countries in a transition towards increased resilience. This changing landscape has redefined the context in which donors and civil society organisations operate, in the North as well as in the South.

This discussion paper addresses a number of issues related to this changing landscape. It aims to contribute to knowledge on the specific characteristics and challenges of engaging with civil society in fragile states, as well as on the changing role of northern CSOs. Its insights will be of particular relevance for donors and civil society in the North. The hope is that this paper can contribute to an even more constructive engagement with civil society, to the benefit of supporting states and societies in a transition out of fragility. This discussion paper is part of a broader effort by ECDPM to deepen the collective (EU) response to issues related to conflict, security and resilience.

In the current discourse on fragile states, state-society relations are seen to be at the core of the transition out of fragility, and civil society has an important role to play in strengthening those relations. Yet, civil society in fragile states often itself suffers from the legacy of fragility or conflict, which weakens its capacity to perform its role. Civil society in fragile states is often polarised, reflecting existing fault lines in society that often contributed to the history of conflict, or widened because of it. The political and legal environment in which civil society operates is often fairly closed to active participation, and states tend to lack responsiveness to demands made by civil society. In particular in Africa, the political space for civil society is shrinking, and is considerably smaller today than in recent years. Civil society in many of these countries has a weak capacity to proactively engage in policy analysis, to accurately aggregate citizens' perspectives, to effectively participate in strategy formulation and to monitor policy implementation – in short, to hold the state to account. In addition, its administrative, fiduciary and reporting competencies are often low, particularly relative to donor requirements. Unfortunately, it is exactly in this sphere of participation and state-society relations where the international community sees important roles for civil society, and where it relies on civil society to provide the necessary counterbalance to approaches that would otherwise be overly reliant on the perspective of government actors.

Yet, it is hard to overemphasise the importance of a strong and capable civil society in fragile states. For one, civil society provides the arena into which societal forces are channelled, and which can drive the social and institutional change necessary for a transition towards increased resilience. This points to the need to foster a civil society that is endogenous and rooted in society, as opposed to one that mushrooms in response to donor funding. This latter, however, is often the case in fragile states. There is also a potential tension between assigning civil society specific roles within the broader strategy of engaging with fragile states, and regarding them as actors in their own right, with their own agendas and in pursuit of their own objectives. This is not a dichotomy, as it is sometimes posited in the development discourse. Rather, civil society organisations are almost by definition doing both, and it is exactly in this holistic approach that their value lies. However, this does mean that engaging with civil society always entails intervening in local dynamics. This is always a political act and should be viewed as such. Particularly in fragile states, local dynamics are conflict prone and difficult to forecast, especially by outsiders. Engaging with civil society

therefore requires 'smart strategies', the development of which is more an art than a science. Conflict sensitivity remains key and requires a deep understanding of local societal dynamics and the civil society landscape.

In recognition of the importance of a vibrant civil society in fragile states, support to civil society is an essential ingredient of the international community's engagement with fragile states. The provision of external support to civil society in fragile states has brought out some thorny issues, which require new ways of thinking about the risks of action (and of inaction). As mentioned, care must be taken to ensure that external action does not lead to an 'artificial' civil society, with insufficient local legitimacy. In the development context, civil society has often become equated with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), a bias that urgently needs to be redressed. This has implications for the selection of partner organisations, as well as for the nature of the partnerships between northern and southern actors. Increased autonomy is needed in agenda setting by southern partners, and a more strategic approach is called for in managing competing accountability demands. A different way of defining eligibility criteria, one that includes criteria of local ownership and legitimacy, could also help to mitigate some of the problems associated with competition between northern and southern CSOs, and the continued dependency of southern CSOs on their northern partners.

Another difficult issue in supporting civil society is the multitude of actors involved, due to the ever-increasing number and type of donors and civil society initiatives. This problem is likely to increase further with the rise of citizen initiatives and alternative sources of funding. The consequence is an ever-increasing fragmentation of civil society initiatives, leading to inefficiencies, confusion among beneficiaries, and a potential erosion of trust in the ability of the state and the international community to ensure effectiveness of their approaches. The World Bank's 2011 *World Development Report* on conflict, security and development captures many lessons learnt for engaging in fragile and conflict-affected settings. That report points to the importance of strengthening confidence in state institutions as an essential component of the transition out of fragility. It argues that a highly fragmented approach to development projects does not help the case. This is not to say that all CSOs should align with all government strategies and programmes and only place themselves in the service of the state, as this would go against their very essence. Yet, fragmentation and incoherence impedes the development of synergies between civil society's own initiatives and between the state's efforts and those of civil society. More strategic thinking is necessary by civil society and their external supporters on when to align with government strategies and programmes, when to harmonise among themselves and when to operate independently. External support can assist in the establishment and effective operation of South-South learning and knowledge-sharing platforms. It can also contribute to development of '*local* best practice', as an alternative to '*international* best practice'.

This overview has focused so far on the role of civil society in the fragile contexts themselves. However, civil society – and in particular northern and transnational civil society – plays an important role in the global policy arena as well. Many civil society organisations have acquired strong thematic knowledge and experience that is valued by governments and their development cooperation departments. They can often provide a more 'people-centred' perspective. Moreover, they have influenced the global agenda on external drivers of fragility, such as illicit resource flows, tax havens, the spread of small arms and corporate bribery. These external forces contribute to and interact with domestic causes of fragility in intricate ways. Reducing their impact therefore makes a significant contribution to the transition out of fragility.

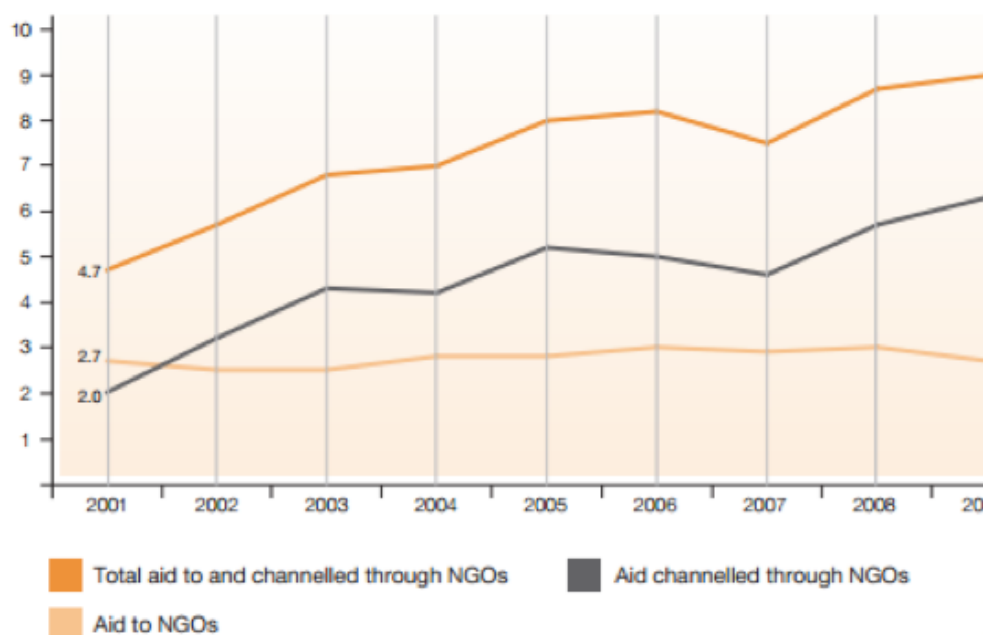
All in all, the gradual strengthening of civil society in the South, increased South-South cooperation and establishment of North-South and East-West linkages can lead to a changing role for northern civil society. Their part in addressing the external drivers of fragility remains of high importance, as does their role in

providing linkages to global civil society with the enhanced legitimacy and protective force that these bring. Northern civil society organisations will also continue to be essential partners for southern civil society in terms of funding, capacity development support and knowledge sharing, but the nature of these partnerships needs to change. A number of elements will be essential to this shift: broader outreach to the less formal and organised civil society; stronger focus on identifying and creating synergies with other actors such as the private sector, local government and informal institutions; deliberate strategies for increasing the autonomy of southern partners; and a type of capacity development support that centres on southern organisations' abilities to frame their agenda, to conduct policy analysis and to identify opportunities for engagement in national or global policy arenas. There is a need to come up with innovative and contextualised mechanisms that can serve these aims. In fragile states, even more than elsewhere, civil society matters. But the shape and form it takes differs widely and that variation needs to be taken seriously if civil society is to play its important role in contributing to a transition out of fragility.

1. Introduction

The issue of civil society on one hand and fragile states on the other has risen in priority on the international agenda. International support to civil society in the South has also grown considerably in recent years. Funding to and through civil society organisations (CSOs) increased by 62 per cent from 2007 to 2009 (figure 1) (OECD 2011a). In addition, southern civil society organisations have grown in number, capacity and legitimacy (World Bank 2005, Tandon 2008).

Figure 1: Official development assistance (ODA) provided to and channelled through NGOs by DAC members, USD billion (2008 constant prices)



Source: OECD 2011a

The importance of civil society globally has also shifted. Civil society organisations are an increasingly integral part of policy debates, norms and standards setting processes. They are also part of governance arrangements at both the national and the supra-national level. It has become hard to imagine a global governance arrangement being negotiated multilaterally without any participation of civil society. Within the sphere of international development, this rising importance of civil society becomes evident when comparing the aid effectiveness declarations of Paris (2005), Accra (2008) and Busan (2011). The growing interest in the public arena for 'global public goods' has further deepened the primacy lent to global civil society. In addition, advances in communication technology have allowed easier exchanges of information and formation of networked civil society partnerships, both North-South and South-South, which has further strengthened capacities and lent legitimacy to southern organisations (Keystone 2011). More actors have appeared on the scene as well. Philanthropists, citizen initiatives and business corporations offer various types of cooperation and funding resources, often with different parameters than the more traditional development channels.

At the same time, however, the political space for civil society in partner countries seems to be shrinking, in particular in Africa. Two-thirds of African states adopted legislation in 2011 that reduces the space for civil society organisations, especially affecting organisations that are politically active or receive international support (Okumu 2011). This trend may be linked to the rise of the 'developmental state' in Africa. Some

states are increasingly looking towards the east for inspiration on how to jumpstart development and economic growth,¹ and in this development model the role of civil society is curtailed rather than promoted.

The changing landscape has altered the context in which donors and civil society organisations operate, in the North as well as in the South. Against this backdrop, the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) conducted a study of the importance of civil society in fragile states.² This discussion paper is derived from that study and aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the characteristics of fragile states and civil society in fragile states, and what particular challenges does this pose for engaging with civil society?
- What are the roles played by civil society in fragile states, and why are these important to support?
- What are the pitfalls and main issues to be addressed in relation to the provision of external support to civil society?

This paper thus contributes to knowledge on the specific characteristics and challenges of engaging with civil society in fragile states, as well as the changing role of northern civil society organisations. The hope is that this will lead to an even more constructive engagement with civil society, to the benefit of enhanced resilient states and societies.

2. Civil society and fragile states

2.1. What is civil society?

CIVICUS, the World Alliance for Citizen Participation, provides the definition of civil society adhered to in this report (box 1).

Box 1: CIVICUS definition of civil society

‘Civil society’ is ‘the arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market where people associate to advance common interests’.

Source: Heinrich & Khallaf (2005)

For our current purposes, this is a useful definition for two main reasons. Firstly, the CIVICUS definition focuses on citizen engagement. It recognises citizens rather than organisations as the basic building block of civil society. The definition covers a wide range of collective action initiatives and civil associational life. It deliberately avoids focusing on organisations, as this tends to lead towards an assessment of civil society according to the number and forms of existing organisations (Heinrich & Khallaf 2005). This is biased against those countries where – for a variety of cultural, political and practical reasons – most civil society associations are informal or not registered, or citizens associate in much more informal and ephemeral forms of collective action, such as street movements and ad hoc coalitions. Inclusion of these less tangible types of civic association is of particular importance in fragile states, where civil society tends to be much less organised and formalised than in other low-income or middle-income countries. Furthermore, in the

¹ Suppressing demands for higher transparency or political opposition may of course be another driver.

² ECDPM has worked on issues related to civil society, including producing guides and leading major evaluations, for over 15 years. It has worked on fragile states for more than 10 years. For more information see www.ecdpm.org

development context, civil society has often become equated with non-governmental organisations (NGOs),³ a bias that now needs to be redressed.

Secondly, CIVICUS defines civil society as an 'arena'. This is a space where citizens associate to advance common interests, but also where debates and battles can take place over narratives and visions for the future. Such an arena can take many forms, depending on the type of institutionalised and informal space that exists in a given society. Civil society is therefore both a reflection of societal dynamics and the arena in which those dynamics play out.

2.2. What are fragile states?

Fragile states are a heterogeneous group of countries. They differ significantly in geographic location, history and geo-strategic interests, extending as they do from Afghanistan to Burundi and Yemen. Definitions and categorisations are fraught with difficulties, which this paper will not enter into. Fragile states are commonly described as states that are incapable of assuring basic security, maintaining rule of law and justice, and providing basic services and economic opportunities for their citizens.⁴ According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a fragile state has weak capacity to carry out basic functions of governing a population and its territory, and it lacks the ability to develop mutually constructive and reinforcing relations with society. As a consequence, trust and mutual obligations between the state and citizens have become weak (OECD 2011b).

Most definitions centre on the weakness of state institutions as the defining feature of fragility. This has led to a focus on strengthening state institutions as a primary objective of engaging with fragile states. As such, there has been a relative overreliance on supply-side approaches to strengthen state institutions and an associated undervaluation of demand-side approaches to strengthen governance. This bias has been recognised in academic and policy discourse, stimulating a renewed policy interest in state-society relations. This includes thinking about strengthening systems of accountability between states and citizens, strengthening citizens' ability to engage and bargain with the state, and strengthening intra-society relations (GSDRC 2009). These aims are based on the notion of the 'social contract', which is viewed as key for a transition out of fragility. This notion relates to the vertical relations, trust and accountability systems between state and society.

Yet, these vertical bonds need to be complemented by strengthened horizontal bonds, that is, strengthened intra-society relations. The 2009 European Report on Development: Overcoming Fragility in Africa, amongst others, underscores the importance of social cohesion for a transition out of fragility (European University Institute 2009). In this view, it is essential for an endogenous civil society to emerge: a civil society that can analyse, aggregate and represent citizens' preferences and policy options, and one that can serve as an arena in which social dynamics can be channelled in a constructive way and contribute to stronger social cohesion. This conceptualisation of a transition out of fragility reflects the importance of societal dynamics more clearly than the more state-centred view of fragility that is normally used, as described above. It therefore serves as the basis of our understanding of fragile states and the role of civil society within them.

³ This paper uses the term 'NGO' to refer specifically to that subset of CSOs that generally understand the development jargon and donor requirements and procedures and in effect receive most of the development assistance targeted towards civil society.

⁴ There is a large literature on defining and categorising fragile states that we will not replicate here. For an overview, see DiJohn (2010) and Fabra Mata and Ziaja (2009).

Fragile states differ in a number of dimensions; and no 'typical' fragile state can be said to exist. Furthermore, in some countries a particular region could be considered fragile, whereas others are not. Likewise, a country not considered fragile might suddenly descend into fragility. In this paper we use the term 'fragile states' rather than 'situations' or 'contexts' of fragility, because of the centrality given here to state-society relations. Root causes of fragility also differ widely between countries, with some of these relating to conflict or other crises and some associated with more structural factors. These root or proximate causes of fragility are combined in different ways, creating highly specific situations for which generalisations are impossible. An autocratic, repressive regime with a low commitment to inclusive development is a completely different environment for civil society to operate in than a country where the state is practically non-existent.

For the purposes of this paper, we regard fragile states as countries with weak state institutions, low effectiveness of the government administration, and a patchy presence of the state on the ground beyond the capital city. We assume weak systems of domestic accountability, a low ability of civil society to bargain with the state and a low responsiveness of the state to its citizens. Furthermore, we recognise that social cohesion may be weak within fragile states (e.g. cohesion across communities or between ethnicities). Although conflict is but one of the causes of fragility, we explicitly include post-conflict societies in our understanding of fragile states.⁵

2.3. Space for civil society in international engagement with fragile states

The space for civil society in donor policy and practice in general, and in fragile states in particular, has increased significantly from the high-level aid effectiveness forum in Paris to that in Accra and then Busan. The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness focuses on government-to-government engagement, and civil society does not feature prominently in this first declaration (Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness 2005). The September 2008 Accra Agenda for Action redresses this imbalance to some degree. It includes four clauses that relate to civil society. These express the need for participation of civil society in national policy formulation, the need to create an enabling environment for civil society, the need for effectiveness of civil society organisations (focus on results), and the need to respect the autonomy of civil society (Giffen and Judge 2010). Article 20 of the Accra Agenda for Action (2008) sets out its goal related to civil society: We will deepen our engagement with CSOs as independent development actors in their own right whose efforts complement those of governments and the private sector.

The Busan Outcome Document (OECD 2011c) goes further, stating that CSOs play a vital role in enabling people to claim their rights, in promoting rights-based approaches, and in shaping development policies and partnerships, as well as overseeing their implementation. CSOs are also recognised as providing services complementary to those provided by states. This increased role for CSOs was heavily lobbied for by civil society itself. Indeed, the space for civil society to engage in these discussions was much broader in the preparations for the Busan forum than it had been for Accra and Paris.

Busan also produced a 'New Deal' specifically for fragile states, reflecting the need felt by donors, governments of fragile states and civil society organisations, for targeted approaches developed for fragile states. Recognition that fragile states require an approach other than business-as-usual is not new. This view was embodied in the OECD principles for international engagement in fragile states and situations (OECD 2007). However, monitoring surveys show that endorsement of these principles stimulated very limited change in donor behaviour and that their implementation was seriously off-track; a wide gap has

⁵ In this paper we will not focus on acute disasters or on situations where humanitarian aid is necessary.

thus remained between policy and practice (OECD 2011d). The 'New Deal' is therefore a renewed commitment:

to deliver international assistance to fragile states, which generates results that are aligned with peacebuilding and statebuilding objectives, is more transparent, flexible and effective, and strengthens (rather than duplicates) national and local capacities and institutions (G7+ 2011).

The 'new deal' was prepared by an inclusive coalition of fragile states, donor countries and civil society. As such, both the content and the process showed more commitment to civil society engagement than the older aid effectiveness declarations.

Although the space for civil society in donor policy and practice in general, and in fragile states in particular, increased from Paris to Accra and Busan, the current paradigm for engagement with fragile states is still quite strongly based on the statebuilding paradigm promoted by *inter alia* the OECD and World Bank. This has statebuilding as the central objective and places prominence on national government strategies and national governmental programmes. While much progress has been made with regard to consultation and participation of civil society, this focus perpetuates the risk that civil society is being assigned a role to play within this statebuilding paradigm, rather than being viewed as an actor in its own right. Roles assigned to civil society within this paradigm are, for example, as contractors to implement government programmes; as 'watchdogs' to monitor implementation of these programmes; as substitutes for government agents in fragile states; and as a way to broaden participation in national development planning (Giffen and Judge, 2010).

2.4. Characteristics of civil society in fragile states

In fragile states, civil society is often fragmented and polarised. Research shows that people's trust and tolerance levels tend to be lower in societies that have been affected by fragility or conflict. Individuals are likely to be less willing to cooperate across societal groups and less willing to give others the 'benefit of the doubt' (Brinkerhoff 2007). Furthermore, conflict tends to strengthen bonding social capital within identity groups, to the detriment of social capital across groups. Communities turn to the in-group as a coping mechanism in the face of fragility and conflict. Such patterns may continue after a conflict, leaving society highly divided.

Societal fault lines and low social cohesion often play an important role in the onset of conflict dynamics and in their perpetuation (Herbst et al. 2012). Conflict itself further damages the horizontal bridges between population groups, weakening any sense of national cohesion. A high degree of polarisation in society is therefore both a frequent product and contributing cause of conflict. During conflict, civil society tends to fall into the same camps as the conflicting parties. Post-conflict, civil society may remain organised along lines of societal fissures and conflict. In post-conflict countries, civil society organisations are often centred around one identity (ethnic or otherwise) and do not bridge the various groups in society⁶ (Rombouts 2006).

In a post-conflict setting, a new way forward needs to be carved out, for which a minimum degree of consensus has to be reached within society. Yet, a polarised society often struggles to construct a new narrative going forward, and its visions are often highly contested. Different groups may have their own

⁶ This is not necessarily negative, as this may serve important positive functions, such as the creation of a stronger identity, and for excluded groups to move out of marginalisation and claim their rights. However, it can fuel further conflict.

ways of constructing meaning from the past. One group's hero may be another group's worst human rights offender, which exacerbates polarisation even after the conflict has ended.

Another characteristic of civil society in fragile states is the way it reflects societal power and voice asymmetries. This is of course not exclusive to fragile states; but power and voice asymmetries tend to be rather more pronounced in fragile states. Civil society in fragile states, therefore, may not represent all of citizens' perspectives equally. Civil society representing the groups that emerged victorious in the conflict or those favoured by the government will typically be stronger than those they fought against, nascent ones and those representing marginalised groups. As such, the weak voices are often not heard, which leads to a biased aggregation of citizens' preferences (Rombouts 2006).

Furthermore, in some countries, there is little recent history of 'civil society action'. This is particularly the case in states with oppressive policies and in those coming out of Communism, such as the former Yugoslavia and much of the former Soviet Union. In a different way, this may also be true of countries where customary governance systems still rule, such as Afghanistan. Traditional governance mechanisms tend to have a less individual 'citizen-based' notion of engaging with the state. They therefore may have less voluntary and interest-based organisation of individual citizens. Furthermore, relations between the state and society in such systems are often mediated not through civil society, but rather in more informal ways. As a result, the degree of formal organisation of civil society is often low in such states, and a culture of civil society participation in the affairs of the state is weak or non-existent.

The lack of a culture of active civil society participation can impede a quick build up of a formal civil society.⁷ In addition, the low human development levels prevalent in many fragile states contribute to undermine the capacity of civil society. Civil society in fragile states therefore often suffers from a weak voice and limited capacity to engage in formal processes, for example, by conducting policy analysis and making policy recommendations. Likewise, there is little civil society capacity for effective management, monitoring and reporting.

At the same time, the inflow of external funding can easily lead to the emergence of an artificial civil society that mirrors the availability of funding rather than actual endogenous forces at play. For instance, in Bosnia-Herzegovina there was a rapid increase in CSOs after the war ended in 1995. Yet this proliferation was driven more by international funding than by endogenous processes (Fischer 2011). Inflow of funds from the international community, and in post-conflict settings the renewed contact with the outside world, creates a wealth of new resources that civil society organisations can tap. International organisations move in, and new local organisations are quickly established. Many of these genuinely aim to address the needs of the population. But some are simply a response to the sudden availability of resources, often also in the absence of other private sector finances. Exacerbating this problem is the fact that lines between civil society and private businesses are not always clearly delineated in fragile states. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for instance, after the state abandoned its public service functions, the distinction between civil society and private businesses became increasingly vague:

There was an explosion of new small and medium businesses in the informal sector as well as of civil society organisations. The boundaries between these were blurred, as individuals used 'their NGOs' to

⁷ However, in some cases it has emerged rapidly, such as in Burundi, which has a fairly vibrant civil society, despite having just emerged from conflict (Omara and Ackson 2010). Other countries did have an active associational life, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which from colonial times inherited a strong culture of trade unions, with estimates ranging from 117 to 380 trade unions countrywide (DRIS Bureau d'études et de conseil 2008).

develop their businesses or sustain their personal political careers (DRIS Bureau d'Etudes et de Conseil 2008).

Such a sudden change in the environment for civil society also provides opportunities for individuals with a more political agenda. In situations where democracy is still nascent, where political parties are not yet well developed, or the political system is monopolised by current power-holders, civil society presents an alternative route for individuals with a change agenda. The presence of resources, and the legitimising force of links to global civil society organisations, offers an avenue for new political leaders to raise their issues and manifest themselves more conductively than in the national political arena.

In summary, civil society in fragile states and post-conflict settings is often highly polarised and fragmented along ethnic or other fault lines in society. Furthermore, its degree of formal organisation and its capacity to engage in formal policy processes is often weak. The inflow of resources and network opportunities that comes with engagement of the international community presents incentives that can provoke the emergence an artificial civil society that is more a reflection of funding than of endogenous forces in society. The civil society arena can also serve as a proxy for commercial entrepreneurialism and political activism.

3. Roles of civil society in fragile states

Civil society has been defined here as 'the arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market where people associate to advance common interests'. It consists of organisations, but also of other forms of civic associational life. As discussed in section 2.3, civil society performs a number of specific roles in approaches to support fragile states in development and crisis management. Yet, civil society is more than the roles that it plays. Civil society is also a reflection of societal dynamics, as well as the arena in which these dynamics play out. A tension therefore exists between the roles that civil society is 'expected to play' and what civil society 'simply is'.

What it 'simply is' includes a wide spectrum of formal and less formal organisations of citizens. The aims of civil society, or more broadly of civic associational life, are wide ranging, from the promotion of narrow self-interests to promotion of the collective. Civil society might include organisations set up mainly as a means to access donor funding or with the aim of establishing a power base in society. The values and interests advanced by these groups are as diverse as society itself, and highly variable across societies. Their values may be deeply rooted, or they may be relatively alien or new to a society. CSOs may be religious or secular. They may be in line with western liberal democratic principles, or they may not be. Their activities and narratives may or may not be disruptive of the status quo. They may advocate for the interests of a specific group or elite, or they may claim to represent the public interest. Some are focused on concrete developmental outcomes, while others pursue agendas of socio-political change. Their type and degree of organisation is similarly varied, with those least shaped by external support generally being most varied in organisational form. CSOs differ both in their degree of formal status and in their possession of accountable governance structures.

Indeed, all of these characteristics should be seen on a spectrum, with blurred distinctions between the categories. For instance, an organisation that aims to contribute to overall societal interests may uphold a theory of change that other groups do not share; it may therefore be perceived as a single-interest group. A faith-based organisation may not promulgate its religious values in its work, while a secular organisation

may use religious values as a way to connect with the community. An organisation that implements projects to deliver basic services may do so in order to win the trust of the community, to strengthen its position in policy debates. Most organisations, in practice, seek to maximise synergy between these different dimensions. Indeed, the very strength of civil society often lies in this holistic approach.

It is therefore difficult to speak of 'the roles played by civil society in fragile states', as civil society simply is what it is and does what it does. Yet, without aiming to instrumentalise CSOs, it is useful to make some distinctions between the different roles that they play within fragile contexts, as each role has its own associated issues and pitfalls. Within the context of international engagement there are particular types of activities in which civil society engages, for which it is likely to receive some kind of external support. Some of these can be described as instrumental roles, such as filling gaps in state service delivery. In other activities, civil society acts more autonomously, as in endogenous peacebuilding initiatives and advocacy or watchdog functions. The boundaries between these areas of activity are seldom clear, as civil society organisations tend to combine roles, though some roles may be at odds with one another.

This chapter describes five roles performed by civil society, for which they are likely to receive funding and other support from the international community:

- participating in policymaking and strategy formulation as part of national development strategies (as per the 'New Deal')
- strengthening domestic accountability and holding the state to account
- assisting in basic service delivery
- contributing to sustainable economic development
- advancing conflict transformation and peacebuilding

Sections 3.1 to 3.5 present key issues associated with each of these specific roles, which are performed within the fragile states themselves. However, civil society is not only active within the fragile states; it also engages in the global policy arena of issues that impact fragile states. This broader arena includes, for example, issues of aid effectiveness in fragile states and questions of global and regional governance that have a bearing on fragile states. Section 3.6 briefly discusses this broader arena of engagement.

3.1. Participation in policy and strategy formulation

The Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation and, in particular, the 'New Deal for Engagement with Fragile States', places great emphasis on ownership, alignment with local priorities and the use of country systems. However, a national development strategy, in its formulation or implementation, may not always be particularly equitable or inclusive, and it may fail to address the priority needs of the rural poor. Strong participation of civil society is therefore necessary to promote broad-based ownership of national development strategies. This is particularly the case if a government shows little commitment to being fully responsive to its citizens or if a state has weak capacity for establishing, implementing and institutionalising participatory processes. Both of these conditions are regularly found in fragile states.⁸ For these reasons, in particular in fragile states, civil society has an important role to play in policy and strategy formulation processes. The objective is to ensure that priorities and needs of citizens are reflected, and that the 'national ownership' is indeed an inclusive one. Civil society can play several key roles towards achieving these objectives:

⁸ These particular difficulties of alignment and ownership in fragile states and dilemmas of moving beyond state institutions have been noted in a number of analyses and evaluations (European University Institute 2009, ADE with ECDPM 2011).

- representing and aggregating the preferences and interests of the population or segments of the population
- conducting policy analysis and effectively participating in the formulation of a shared vision and national policy and strategies, including the associated budgeting processes
- monitoring the execution of national development strategies

A number of difficulties, however, arise with respect to civil society engagement in policy and strategy formulation. Research conducted for the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) shows three elements that are needed for participation to lead to increased and effective citizen engagement:

- political will of the state
- institutionalised spaces for participation with a degree of citizen influence on processes and agenda-setting
- effective citizen mobilisation and representation (Giffen and Judge 2010)

These conditions are often absent in fragile states, as the next sections will show.

3.1.1. Political will of the state

Political will of the state and a strong enabling environment for civil society is a first prerequisite for effective participation of civil society. The space for civil society is often not wide in fragile states, and in many cases it may be narrowing. A recent analysis, based on 14 country cases, shows that CSOs' ability to freely operate is increasingly thwarted by government policies and actions (ACT Alliance 2011). Two-thirds of African states adopted legislation in 2011 that reduces the space for CSOs, especially those that are politically active or receive international support (Okumu 2011).

3.1.2. Tokenism and lip service to participation

Fragile states often lack an institutionalised space for civil society to engage with government. At the same time, these states have limited capacity to organise and manage such consultations. In this regard, donors do not always lead by example, as a recent evaluation showed (ECDPM & Particip 2008). Furthermore, government-to-government political dialogue may leave little space for a genuine and open dialogue with civil society, as strategies are often drawn up through complex and sensitive negotiations between partner governments. The Tunis Consensus⁹ clearly expresses this sentiment:

Both parliaments and civil society organisations have often been frustrated with the forms of participation that have resulted from donor pressure. It often appears to them that government and donors make the real decisions behind closed doors, inviting parliamentarians and civil society along at the last minute to validate the results (Tunis Consensus 2010: 9).

These factors reduce the effectiveness of civil society engagement and create a sense that mere lip service is being paid to the notion of participation. Gaventa and Barrett (2001) found that in one quarter of cases, those who participated were left with a negative perception of their involvement. This raises issues of disempowerment, loss of agency, tokenism, manipulations, elite capture of processes and use of newly acquired skills and alliances for corrupt ends (ibid.). If participation is seen as superficial and merely a 'ticking the boxes' exercise, the whole notion of civil participation and engagement may be delegitimised. This is particularly dangerous in countries where a culture of participation with the state is relatively

⁹ The Tunis Consensus is a joint statement by the African Development Bank, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) Planning and Coordinating Agency and the African Union Commission in preparation for the Fourth High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan.

nascent and fragile (Rombouts 2006). Nonetheless, citizen participation does seem worthwhile. In three quarters of the cases studied by Gaventa and Barrett (*ibid.*),¹⁰ the outcomes of participation were considered positive.

3.1.3. Broad-based representation of citizens

Effective citizen mobilisation and representation presupposes a well organised civil society that equitably represents all factions of society. This is a difficult condition to meet in fragile states. In addition to inadequately aggregating the views of citizens, power asymmetries in society may become further entrenched if powerful groups have the strongest voice and marginal voices go unheard.

In addition, not all CSOs are pro-poor, non-violent, inclusive, and adhere to democratic values – though this may not be visible on the surface. ‘Uncivil’ CSOs may therefore be inadvertently legitimised. Excluding them, however, brings the risk of delegitimising the process of participation, especially if they have a broad support base in society. Another risk is that organisations may adhere to certain minimum values, but influence policy in the ‘wrong’ (anti-modernising) direction. This is a worry for actors with a progressive agenda (Rombouts 2006), including national reformers and donors.

Furthermore, effective participation is premised on the capacity to articulate and express a clear vision, and to identify opportunities for influencing key decisions. These capacities are limited and not equally distributed across society (Rombouts 2006). Capacity issues, as well as ease of access and communication with certain CSOs over others, often leads to a bias towards urban-based or elitist CSOs (Bell 2009, Brewer et al. 2008). The weak capacity of southern CSOs may result in northern CSOs occupying seats around the table, representing the views of their southern partners, or their own views. This raises questions about their legitimacy to speak on behalf of society, and indeed, the degree to which they accurately represent societal perspectives.

3.1.4. The conflict-inducing potential of participation

The notion of ‘consensus’ underpins strategies of inclusive participation. The idea is that civil society will somehow come to a shared vision for the future. However, the defining characteristic of civil society organisations is their different visions, and it should not automatically be assumed that an open debate between these worldviews can be held in a constructive manner and always lead to consensus (Rombouts 2006).

Participation of civil society may in fact increase conflict. It provides a platform for bringing tensions to the table, while society may not be quite ready to deal with these issues at that point in time (Rombouts 2006). Participation may even exacerbate social cleavages if the selection of actors inadvertently raises the standing of one group over another, in particular, if these cleavages follow the lines of a past or ongoing conflict (World Bank 2006). Actively engaging a civil society that is polarised and conflict-prone can spark and inflame latent tensions. This risk is greater in post-conflict and repressive states, where there is often a higher influence of ‘uncivil’ and violent non-state groups that may not be fully committed to peace (World Bank 2006).

¹⁰ The authors studied 100 cases of citizen engagement in 20 countries.

3.2. Strengthening domestic accountability and holding the state to account

State-society relations are often weak in fragile states, where trust in government institutions tends to be low, the presence of the state is often patchy, and state responsiveness to citizen demands is limited. A primary objective in fragile states is therefore to create a system of domestic accountability through which citizens' expectations can be met or managed by a state that is sufficiently responsive.¹¹

Civil society organisations can be drivers of accountability by empowering citizens, strengthening citizens' voices, demanding transparency, making information accessible and monitoring the performance of the state.¹² As such, CSOs can positively impact governance from the bottom upwards, especially with regard to greater mutual accountability between local government and communities. CSOs can also introduce more participatory approaches to community-level decision making (World Bank 2005). Yet, attempts to strengthen domestic accountability through civil society activity are not without pitfalls.

3.2.1. Imbalances in support to domestic accountability actors

A strong focus on civil society can lead to an overt bias towards civil society's role in systems of domestic accountability. This may undermine other key accountability institutions, such as parliaments, political parties, community initiatives and the media, leading to unbalanced accountability systems (Hudson & Govnet 2009, ODI 2007). This risk is quite high in fragile situations where parliaments and formal political processes are weak – as is often the case in fragile states. Although this is increasingly acknowledged, most actors continue their tendency to involve 'traditional' partners, such as international and national NGOs (ODI 2007).

3.2.2. Need for political backing

A strong enabling environment is one of the key factors in civil society's effectiveness in strengthening domestic accountability. In contexts with a weak enabling environment or a non-responsive state – as in many fragile states – formally organised civil society may find relatively little space to interact with the government (Dowst 2009, Rombouts 2006, Earle 2011, ECDPM & Particip 2008). Civil society action can push against the grain, but its impact will be limited in a repressive environment. International actors therefore cannot rely on civil society action alone to strengthen voice and accountability. They will also increasingly need to use the instrument of political dialogue to open the space for civil society. A comprehensive evaluation of all European Commission support to civil society from 2000 to 2006 showed that the Commission does not sufficiently engage in political dialogue with partner governments to ensure respect of laws and agreements concerning civil society (ECDPM & Particip 2008).

Of course, there is a political risk associated with supporting organisations that are critical of government policies and state responsiveness to citizens' demands. Such support may cause tension with the partner government. Nevertheless, once a decision has been made to support a civil society organisation that aims to strengthen voice and accountability, the political will must be there to back them up, in particular where southern CSOs are concerned (Earle 2011). Northern civil society can perform this role to some degree. For example, partners in the North might direct international attention to government threats to local civil society, and they may be able to offer some protection through their global networks.¹³

¹¹ ECDPM has published a series of discussion papers on domestic accountability, such as Bossuyt et al. (2009) and Loquai and Fanetti (2011).

¹² However, according to a recent evaluation of donor support to such voice and accountability initiatives evidence on the effectiveness and impact of these programmes is patchy (ODI 2007).

¹³ One such example was when Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project lobbied on behalf of the Forum for the Strengthening of Civil Society (FORSC), a

3.2.3. Strengthened state responsiveness

The degree of influence that external actors have on the enabling environment should not be overestimated. In many scenarios, other ways must be found for attempting to strengthen citizen engagement. An example is by opening lines for direct – unmediated – citizen engagement, in particular, to provide access to basic services or to improve their quality. This is seen as less politically volatile, and therefore less problematic. Such programmes might incorporate structural features that contribute to domestic accountability, such as direct citizen monitoring of state actors or service providers (DFID 2011b). Indeed, such interventions have had a positive impact on accountability in sectors such as health, education, and water and sanitation (GSDRC 2011). The systematic use of community-based organisations in the monitoring of national programmes could also be promoted.¹⁴ Still, research shows that for these programmes to be effective, there must also be a focus on concrete mechanisms for delivering citizens' voice to the state. Building voice without an accompanying effort to strengthen state capacity and willingness to respond might raise unmet expectations (ODI 2007). The international community can exercise some degree of influence on this during the design of national (governmental) programmes, into which these structural features can be built.

3.2.4. Endogenous movements for increased accountability

Ultimately, if citizens are expected to hold the state to account, there needs to be strong ownership by the citizens themselves. The legitimacy and accountability of actors has been shown to be a crucial factor in the success and sustainability of voice and accountability initiatives (ODI 2007). Yet, external support often creates incentives to develop projects that are not genuinely rooted in endogenous processes. CSOs that receive external support may thus fall victim to perverse accountability initiatives, for example, when a CSO becomes more accountable to the organisation providing financial support than to the communities it aims to serve (Fischer 2006).

In contexts with a weak enabling environment for civil society and no institutionalised spaces for interaction with the state, social movements and other less organised civil activism may be the only vehicles through which citizens can effect change and hold the state to account. Such social movements have the potential to democratise the state. By fostering a sense of citizenship amongst movement members, they can be a strong force for social transformation (Earle 2011). Yet, when these spontaneous movements demand more domestic accountability, they often encounter difficulty in accessing resources and garnering any type of formal support, as these movements are seldom formally registered, and the political risk of supporting them is high. Demands for greater accountability that do receive support may consequentially be less deeply rooted in society and therefore a less strong force for social transformation.

3.3. Assisting in basic service delivery

Among the key functions of the state are to provide sufficient security, to enable economic development and to ensure that the essential needs of the population are met. A fragile state by definition is characterised by an inability or unwillingness to perform these functions. Thus, weak provision of basic services is a defining feature. Many risk factors for civil conflict relate to living conditions and to human needs that can be fulfilled by basic services, such as health, nutrition, sanitation and education. Effective service delivery can therefore contribute to a virtuous cycle out of fragility.

Burundian umbrella civil society organisation representing 146 Burundian civil society associations, when it was threatened by the government with deregistration. For more information see Human Rights Watch (2009).

¹⁴ Such as the National Solidarity Program in Afghanistan.

Basic services are generally seen as a core responsibility of the state. Visible engagement by government in effective service delivery may therefore strengthen political stability and peace (World Bank 2005). Restoration of basic services also serves a signalling function, as emphasised in the 2011 World Development Report. Restoring service delivery can build confidence in state institutions and boost their legitimacy, both of which are fundamental to a transition out of fragility.¹⁵ The long-term goal is to restore (or create) state capacity to deliver basic services to citizens. Although the state may not have the implementation capacity, it remains responsible for setting policies and ensuring their implementation. Civil society partnerships with the state in basic service delivery are therefore not a matter of either/or, but rather of degree. There is always a dilemma posed by the need to fulfil urgent requirements versus the need to build up sustained government capacity. Yet, in fragile states, the inability of the state to deliver basic services to its citizens means that civil society organisations often must step in to fill gaps (OECD 2008). There are disadvantages, however, associated with service provision by civil society.

3.3.1. Long-term sustainability

Reliance on CSOs may hinder sustainability and cost-effectiveness. Maintenance of infrastructure and continuity in covering recurrent costs requires a permanent presence, which CSOs often cannot commit to and provide. Scaling up activities to a national level requires institutions to be present throughout the country, which most CSOs are not. Service delivery also requires a harmonised approach, and universal and equal access to services. CSOs, however, tend to deliver services under different parameters. Efficient delivery of basic services requires a coordinated and interdependent multi-sector approach, which is very difficult to achieve amongst a collection of independent civil society organisations (World Bank 2005).

Furthermore, CSO basic service providers occupy a space that could theoretically also be filled by other actors, such as local authorities and private sector service providers. They may thus form an obstacle to the emergence of a private sector around service delivery, though this could be a more sustainable solution in the long run. A number of CSOs are in fact enterprises in disguise. This potential problem could be transformed into an opportunity by putting in place a strategy to transform such NGOs into private sector organisations when the environment becomes conducive. This has received insufficient attention up to now.

3.3.2. Civil society independence

CSOs have expressed a concern that taking on the role of service providers on behalf of the state will lead to their instrumentalisation and loss of autonomy. This risk goes back to the basic tension between what civil society 'simply is' and 'what it does'. An association with the state may impair an organisation's independence, and this may negatively affect its relationship with the community (Quinn 2002). Most civil society organisations perform more than one role, and it may be the other role that is negatively affected by the alignment with government. This is particularly relevant for the more political roles of policy advocacy, peacebuilding, and other processes that aim to impact societal power relations (section 3.5 returns to peacebuilding and conflict transformation). Civil society organisations use service delivery as a way to build trust and credibility with communities, in order to work on more transformative activities in the more political sphere. This work may be jeopardised by having too close an association with the state.

¹⁵ However, outside of such important signalling functions, the WDR does not place a high priority on restoring basic services. Instead, it prioritises building up the justice system, addressing citizen security and creating employment. Basic services, such as health, education and safe water are not prioritised in the initial stage (5–10 years) of fragility. Yet, depending on the specific history and legacy of relative exclusion, service delivery to the formerly marginalised can perform a very important signalling role. Examples are the focus on creating economic opportunities for black and coloured populations in South Africa post-Apartheid and the focus on increasing access to girls' education in Afghanistan post-Taliban (World Bank 2011).

3.3.3. Fragmentation of independent efforts

Following from the above, it is now widely recognised that CSOs play complementary roles to those of governments. Lack of alignment with the state can have advantages. It enables CSOs to maintain a strong 'people focus', and CSOs are relatively unhindered by the political nature of the relationship between donors and partner governments. CSOs can also target areas and countries at risk of becoming 'aid orphans'. However, CSOs generally have no strong strategic rationale for deciding when they should work on behalf of the state and when to maintain their independence. Such judgements are made individually by each organisation depending on the situation at hand. This can lead to a fragmentation of efforts and unequal levels and quality of service delivery. In one district, a CSO may dig a well at no cost, whereas in another residents may be asked to contribute to pay for the project; in yet a third district, inhabitants might be provided with food for their labour in digging the well. From citizens' perspectives, such inconsistency may reflect negatively on the international community, on civil society and on their own government's ability to be effective and coordinate. It may also hamper efforts to consolidate service delivery into a coherent whole in the future. Most crucially, it could undermine the sense of inclusivity and equality that is so important to instil, in particular, in a post-conflict setting.

3.4. Contributing to sustainable economic development

Creation of opportunities for development is more than just the provision of basic services to the poor. No fragile state has attained any of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), though these remain the cornerstone of much development policy. Poverty reduction requires sustainable economic development, which in turn relies on a set of interconnected resources, such as physical assets, productive human capital, financing, education and skills training. Because power relations influence access to these resources, empowerment is another important ingredient for development. Civil society organisations have traditionally been heavily involved in this area of work, through various types of projects at the community level. NGOs often combine activities like income generation, vocational training, enterprise development, value chain development and improved agricultural practices with an empowerment component. Yet, there are challenges associated with this field of activity as well.

3.4.1. Traditional approaches and dependency

Economic regeneration and poverty alleviation are traditional fields of work for NGOs. Some NGOs remain wedded to out-dated notions of poverty alleviation, and their approaches tend to create continued dependency on the NGO. Furthermore, these 'traditional' NGOs tend to work in isolation rather than building bridges with other actors in the field, such as local authorities and private sector actors.

In recent years, the international private sector has emerged more strongly on the scene in developing countries, including to some degree in fragile states. Similarly, popular pressure has raised awareness among private actors of the virtues of sustainable and producer-friendly supply chains. Many private companies now view corporate social responsibility as core to their business interests. In addition, business corporations are expanding into market segments that used to be considered uninteresting, such as the rural and urban poor (the 'base of the pyramid'). Civil society organisations can act as important players in linking these actors in a way that leads to sustainable economic regeneration. For instance, some of the more progressive NGOs have been instrumental in establishing public-private partnerships and connecting the poor to markets.¹⁶ Although 'traditional' NGOs have tended to shy away from partnering

¹⁶ Although this holds true for regular development contexts, in fragile states, there are often more fundamental elements missing that preclude a strong connection of the poor to markets and tend to keep the private sector away. These more fundamental factors, such as security and basic infrastructure, should hold priority over interventions geared towards increasing market access.

with private actors, this may be changing. In recent years, more NGOs have demonstrated a capacity to engage with the private sector in innovative ways.

3.4.2. Fragmentation of CSO activities

The absence of active government engagement and the importance of holistic and contextual approaches means that sustainable economic development projects are often designed and implemented by civil society organisations without strong government alignment or harmonisation with other actors.

A particular challenge faced by some fragile states, though definitely not all, is the large number of actors on the ground and the fragmentation of their activities. Many countries have more than 40 donors present, all of which support a – sometimes large – number of civil society organisations (WRR 2010). The intentions are often good, but the resulting fragmentation and ill coordination can lead to chaotic situations. Governments of fragile states are seldom able to coordinate this multitude of initiatives. In addition, country governments are often ill informed about the activities of CSOs, which further impairs efforts to coordinate and to share lessons learnt.

In the absence of strong coordination mechanisms by country governments or donors, civil society actors may themselves take responsibility for harmonising their actions. However, such coordination is hampered by an inability of CSOs to adjust their activities, as they are often bound to an accountability framework based on a specific strategy and output indicators. These may be monitored by both the donor and the communities they serve. Their attempts at coordination therefore seldom become more than a simple exchange of information on past and planned action, as opposed to a coherent joint vision, plans and cooperation.

3.4.3. Localised learning

Economic development initiatives are often based on ideology or the transplantation of best practices from elsewhere. Indeed, civil society organisations tend to have a particularly strong sense of ownership of their approaches, which they often have developed over a long time. Their reluctance to adopt more harmonised ways of working reflects to some degree their reluctance to abandon these. In addition, the learning achieved from their autonomous projects may not have been shared in-country. Experiences with innovative approaches often feed into a growing body of literature on ‘international best practice’, bypassing the strong need to build up ‘local best practice’. This requires a significant change towards a mind-set of sharing and learning from each other locally, which is difficult in a situation where competition between CSOs is rife and where ideological stances are strong.

3.4.4. Harmonisation or innovation: What matters more?

A key question in initiatives for sustainable development is therefore the ‘optimal’ degree of harmonisation. This optimum degree of harmonisation will differ in each situation. More clarity of thinking (and less ideological bias) is needed to find it.

One important criterion to consider is the relative importance of harmonisation versus innovation. For the delivery of basic services, the values of inclusivity and equal treatment are of the highest importance in fragile states, especially in those that harbour population groups that in the past have suffered unequal access to services. Some harmonisation of service delivery is therefore essential. In addition, a harmonised national programme is likely to be much more efficient than ad hoc, fragmented and uncoordinated efforts by a large number of civil society organisations. However, there are costs associated with harmonised national programmes. National programmes tend to follow best practice models, and are therefore quite constrained in their innovative potential and ability experiment with local solutions.

Harmonised approaches can thus lead to reduced innovation and endogenous solution seeking. They face a similar constraint in forging 'smart' partnerships based on solid understanding of the local political economy. Innovative design of sector programmes might overcome these obstacles to some degree. Within a sector programme a certain 'space' could be created for experimentation to build on local capacities and resources and to further improve and fine tune strategies.¹⁷ However, as few sector programmes have such mechanisms in place, their general tendency is to stifle adaptation to local contexts.

In practice, innovation is less important in basic service delivery than in broader initiatives for sustainable economic development. Therefore, the advantages of a harmonised approach to service delivery outweigh the disadvantages, particularly in fragile states. Civil society should therefore continue to improve its degree of alignment with national programmes for service delivery where they exist and where they meet the principles of inclusivity and equal access. Innovation and adaptation to the local context is more valuable in broader approaches for sustainable economic development. Strategies for strengthening livelihoods and generating economic opportunities are often holistic in nature, and make use of local capacities, resources and (sometimes) informal institutions. This allows for much greater local adaptation. Nonetheless, a major drawback of autonomous – and innovative – approaches remains the high degree of fragmentation of CSO activity that may result (World Bank 2005).

3.5. Conflict transformation and peacebuilding

Peacebuilding and conflict transformation is an important category of activity for civil society in fragile states. There is a general consensus on the complementarity between state and non-state initiatives in peaceful transformation (World Bank 2006). The role of civil society organisations in peacebuilding and conflict transformation is mostly, though not exclusively, at the community and grassroots level: promoting reconciliation, advancing non-violent forms of conflict management and transformation, directly preventing violence, building bridges of trust and interdependence between groups, and monitoring and advocating in favour of peace and against human rights violations and social injustices (World Bank 2005, Paffenholz 2009).

The involvement of civil society in peacebuilding has not yet been the subject of commensurate independent research on the effectiveness or impact of civil society on peacebuilding, and evidence to that effect is still scarce (Paffenholz 2009). Yet, some important lessons and risks have been identified regarding the effectiveness civil society involvement in peacebuilding initiatives.

3.5.1. Conflict sensitivity

Civil society and donor-funded initiatives that aim to foster positive social transformation and peacebuilding are not always conflict sensitive (Fischer 2006). This is a particular problem when activities are based on a weak understanding of the underlying drivers of conflict (Paffenholz 2009, Partos 2008). Adequate context and conflict analyses at the local level form an essential basis for informed choices and, more specifically, for a realistic mapping of the stakeholders (both potential spoilers and potential peacebuilders) (Fischer 2006, APFO 2004). Findings of such analyses also need to be sufficiently incorporated in informing programming.¹⁸

¹⁷ Such an approach is promoted in a number of recent papers, such as Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock (2012).

¹⁸ See for instance the recent evaluation of the European Commission's thematic support to conflict prevention and peacebuilding (ADE with ECDPM 2011).

One key challenge for CSOs is to fulfil the right functions at the right time and to carefully adapt to transition phases in the context of fragility. For instance, recent research found that during conflict and in its immediate aftermath, priority should be on protection, monitoring, advocacy and public communication. Reconciliation and facilitating a culture of peace and peace education are longer term processes, more relevant in the post-conflict phase. Much is to be gained by greater synchronicity of activities along these lines (World Bank 2006).

3.5.2. Strategic vision and synergy between civil society and governmental efforts

Research on peacebuilding activities highlights the need for a long-term, contextualised, strategic vision around peace-related civil society activities (World Bank 2006). A recent evaluation of the conflict transformation activities of Dutch NGOs likewise showed that opportunities for synergies and meaningful results have been missed due to a lack of clearly operationalised policies and strategies at the country level (Partos 2008). As one example, peacekeeping and reconciliation activities have seldom been linked to promoting a culture of citizenship, which is vital in fragile states (Haider 2010). Some civil society actors have acquired substantial experience in peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Donors and host-country governments could capitalise on these experiences, which provide a clear window to the societal forces at play. CSOs' experiences could then be incorporated more powerfully in the design of national strategies and programmes (World Bank 2006).

3.5.3. Southern-based knowledge exchange

Learning across initiatives and sharing experiences may lead to increased synergy. In this respect, civil society can play a major role in supporting platforms for increased coherence and knowledge sharing.¹⁹ The former Peace Development and Security Network was a good example of a knowledge platform in the Netherlands; FrEint is an example in Germany. At the European level there is the umbrella organisation the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLLO). At the global level, an example is the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict.²⁰ Though these are all good examples, all are northern-based. However, northern-based learning is unlikely to lead to localised best practice, as information flows outward rather than horizontally between local actors.

A recent evaluation showed few cases of proactive coordination to establish southern-based platforms for developing a common vision (Partos 2008). Many CSOs are reluctant to commit to the more coherent approaches needed for more effective conflict transformation, for various reasons – such as the prevailing culture among partners to stress their own identity, lack of experience with binding cooperation, short-term institutional self-interests in a context of competition for funds. Few organisations are prepared to relinquish their individual positions and interests and to willingly position themselves under a coordinating body (Partos 2008).

3.5.4. Sustained support, especially when the going gets tough

Peacebuilding efforts overall require long-term strategic support. Sustained support is particularly important for initiatives targeting difficult-to-achieve aims, such as socialisation around values of peace and democracy, strengthening the in-group identity of marginalised segments of society and building inter-group cohesion (Paffenholz 2009, World Bank 2006). Those civil society organisations that are involved in

¹⁹ However, information derived at grassroots level can be sensitive and even put people at risk. It is therefore important to make sure that CSOs are not *obliged* to share all information that they acquire.

²⁰ A degree of caution should be adopted at any 'self-assessment' by a sector (such as civil society or NGOs) regarding its impact on peacebuilding. There have been positive independent evaluations of NGOs' peacebuilding impact. See, for example, an evaluation of the international NGO Conciliation Resources and its CSO relations (Stockholm Policy Group 2010).

such sensitive processes are the ones that will be most deeply affected by aid volatility, particularly if financial and political support is interrupted when the going gets rough.

3.6. Engagement in the global policy arena

Civil society is active not only within the fragile states themselves, but also in the international policy arena. Civil society organisations may participate in setting norms and standards; contribute to discussions on international commitments; engage in policy and aid effectiveness campaigns, and so forth. Civil society actors, similarly, may perform a knowledge brokerage role, between the grassroots level and the policy arena, and they may serve as a repository of knowledge and expertise. As such, they have in many cases come to act as a global watchdog.

Civil society efforts can aim to reduce the presence and impact of external drivers of weak governance. These activities in the global arena are of crucial significance for fragile states, arguably even more important than direct poverty reduction interventions (World Bank 2011). This is particularly the case when activities aim at diminishing international drivers of conflict and fragility and transnational stresses on fragile states, such as narcotics trade, trafficking, arms trade,²¹ external support for armed groups, mercenaries, cross-border crime, corporate corruption, tax havens, corporate corruption (in particular in relation to extractive industries), and lack of transparency in corporate and donor spending. These and many perverse global incentives contribute significantly to the sources of fragility. A DFID analysis found that international actors may have far more leverage over these external sources of fragility than over the more internal determinants (DFID 2011a).

In a world of intensified resource scarcity and rising consumer demand, concerns over future food, water and energy security will continue to grow. Access to natural resources thus will remain an underlying consideration in international relations and internal power dynamics. Fragile states are not isolated from this trend; they may even be a primary mark.²² Citizens in fragile states are at risk of being among the first victims of the scramble for resources. Civil society has a role to play as a global monitor and whistleblower. The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and organisations such as Global Witness are examples of such a watchdog function, as is the International Land Coalition.

Some thematically specialised CSOs have built up a significant body of technical expertise and now serve as repositories of knowledge and experience. In recent decades much of international civil society – with the exception of emergency humanitarian aid – has moved away from direct implementation of projects towards the roles of facilitator, capacity builder and knowledge broker. This expertise and policy analysis capability of organisations has come to be widely valued and now plays a major role in the national and global policy arena. Regarding conflict analysis and conflict transformation, organisations like International Alert, Saferworld and Reconciliation Resources are good examples of repositories of knowledge and expertise that can be both critical and constructive. International Alert, for instance, now provides conflict assessment, analysis and facilitation expertise to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²³

²¹ For example, Saferworld has been critical of the European Union and EU member states regarding arms exports to North Africa and the Middle East, which it contends has fuelled fragility and conflict (Saferworld 2011).

²² The World Bank shows, for instance, that investors in land are specifically attracted to countries with poor governance systems and weak protection of the rights of the current land users (Deininger and Byerlee 2011).

²³ There is a risk that donors and other external actors will come to rely on external expertise for conflict analysis. A recent DFID evaluation of country programmes in fragile states, for instance, showed that conflict analyses may not be translated into programming decisions. This risk is heightened if the context analysis is conducted by external actors (Chapman and Vaillant 2010). Outsourcing thus creates a gap between analysis and decision making, which reduces the degree to which decision makers internalise the information. Such constraints can be overcome by using a more participatory approach to the information gathering and analysis, such as the one used by

Northern CSOs have long played a key role in promoting better practice and aid effectiveness. For instance, International Alert, Saferworld, the former Forum for Early Warning and Early Response (working with southern CSOs), and the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) were pivotal in promotion of a 'conflict-sensitive approach' at a policy and operational level within the international community.

Furthermore, civil society aims to influence donor policies and strategies and to ensure that people's perspectives are incorporated. They work towards these goals through advocacy and policy analysis, but also by knowledge brokerage. Civil society can improve the incorporation of grassroots knowledge and experience in policy dialogue, in strategy formulation and in the choice of instruments. Such input can counterbalance overly theoretical approaches, often challenging prevailing strategies and renewing dialogue. In addition, it can play an early warning function and identify pockets of neglected areas.

3.6.1. New types of partnerships

For civil society to perform these functions effectively, strong partnerships between northern and southern civil society organisations are of benefit to both. Partnerships are essential for northern organisations, as their southern partners are their eyes and ears on the ground allowing them to maintain a strong 'people' perspective. Part of the credibility and legitimacy of northern CSOs in influencing the global policy arena stems from their continued engagement with grassroots-level organisations and communities. This engagement must not be lost when such organisations become more specialised and active in the global arena.

Similarly, southern organisations benefit from alliances with northern partners, which may provide a degree of protection at home, credibility and increased access to policy processes and support at the national, regional and international levels. Indeed, southern CSOs highly value access to knowledge and policy analysis capacity, alongside insights on windows of opportunity for policy advocacy, as a recent survey showed (Keystone 2011). South-South and North-South collaboration thus strengthens capacities and lends more legitimacy to both sides.

Despite the mutual benefits of partnerships, the role of influencing policy in a broader arena is still heavily dominated by northern CSOs. Southern CSOs are mostly represented indirectly by their northern counterparts. While some southern CSOs are gaining their own seat at the table, overall the balance is still heavily weighted towards northern organisations.

A survey conducted among more than a thousand local CSO partners in developing countries found that some perceived relationships as unequal and had limited confidence in northern NGOs' abilities and understanding. Others reported high levels of satisfaction with respectful, well informed and effective collaboration. Overall, the results of the survey suggest that northern NGOs add most value when they treat southern partners as equals, sharing in decision making rather than acting merely as implementing agents or sub-contractors. Priorities expressed by southern CSOs for future support were to develop joint strategies with northern NGOs, to access new sources of support and to share lessons amongst similar organisations. They did not indicate a need for help in strengthening specific technical or management capacities, even when these options were available (Keystone 2011).

International Alert when working with the Dutch Fragile States and Building Unit and Dutch embassies in undertaking conflict analysis. Other more participatory approaches to conflict analysis involving local CSOs in terms of defining priorities have been used by some donors such as in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Sherriff 2009).

It would thus seem important for northern CSOs to continue to build strong linkages with their southern counterparts. But these relationships should take new forms. Preferred forms of partnerships are based less on financial support and more on non-financial assistance, such as exchanges of information and expertise, mutual strengthening of legitimacy and credibility and increased access to various policy arenas. Indeed, in some cases southern CSOs considered non-financial support more important than financial assistance (Keystone 2011).

4. Civil society as an arena for societal dynamics

Chapter 3 reviewed the roles performed by civil society in fragile states and in the global policy arena. However, chapter 2 stressed that civil society can also be seen as an arena in which societal dynamics play out: where societal forces meet to manage the tensions and stresses that arise when perspectives and opinions differ; where social cohesion can be strengthened; where society can develop its own visions for the future independent of the government; and where knowledge can be created. This arena can be used in constructive ways, but also destructively. Social cohesion can be strengthened. But it can be weakened as well, depending on how the dynamics play out, as the arena in itself is value-neutral. The international community cannot create this space, but its actions do influence the way the arena is shaped and utilised.

The roles discussed in chapter 3 can in theory be performed by either northern or southern organisations. Both have specific comparative advantages and disadvantages. By contrast, a civil society arena in which societal dynamics play out needs to have firm roots in the society itself. Strengthening southern civil society thus becomes an aim in itself. Contributing to a vibrant civil society is indeed a policy objective of a number of donor countries.²⁴ Yet, the ways the international community engages with civil society has implications for the way the southern civil society arena develops. Indeed, the distinction between an ‘endogenous southern civil society’ and an ‘exogenous northern civil society’ should not be exaggerated, as these categories have become deeply intertwined. Without aiming to reify this distinction, more attention should be paid to the effects of international engagement on southern civil society development. This chapter discusses some of the issues at play.

4.1. Southern civil society: A snake pit?

Most civil society organisations aim for social change: to redress marginalisation of particular groups, to protect human rights, to advocate for free press or for women’s rights, to provide access to natural resources and protect them from exploitation, and so forth. In fragile states, they often aim to influence governance relations, which are generally a reflection of unequal patterns of power distribution. This type of social change can only come from within (although it can be supported by outside help), and civil society is one of the main drivers. These endogenous drivers are therefore of the utmost importance, as they contribute to the societal dynamics that are the foundation of all social change (Haider 2010, OECD 2011b). In a post-conflict society, there are often many different perspectives on the future. A fragmented society, in which communities have turned inward through periods of hardship, often struggles to construct a new narrative going forward. These visions are often highly contested, and social cohesion tends to be

²⁴ Such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Finland. The recent communication of the European Commission on Europe’s engagement with civil society in external relations starts with the sentence ‘an empowered and competent civil society is a crucial component of any democratic system and *an asset in itself* (*italics added*, European Commission 2012).

weak. This makes it even more important than in 'regular' development contexts to have an arena into which these different perspectives can be channelled in a constructive way.

While the emergence of a strong civil society is vital in fragile states, the form this arena takes is not predefined. A vibrant civil society need not resemble civil society in the West, or in another developing country. Structural factors, historical legacies and institutional path dependencies create the breeding ground for civil society activity. International engagement can significantly influence the shape the arena takes on. Engagement of external actors with the sole aim of strengthening civil society therefore raises a number of thorny issues.

4.1.1. Unpredictable effects

Firstly, engaging with civil society actors that are value-driven and intent on achieving social change by definition means interfering in internal societal power dynamics. The explicit aim of these organisations is to alter societal dynamics, so engaging with them can either alleviate or exacerbate conflict. Likewise, it may redress or further entrench power asymmetries. Such outcomes are hard to foresee, in particular for external actors with insufficient insight into society.

Civil society in fragile states is often fragmented along lines of societal divisions. Hence, supporting mono-ethnic or otherwise monolithic organisations may exacerbate conflict, or entrench and legitimise power asymmetries (World Bank 2006). Yet, attempts at setting strict criteria around cross-ethnicity may create incentives to form CSOs that are opportunistic, weak and not rooted in society – at best marriages of convenience. There is no silver bullet to managing these trade-offs. The principle of 'do no harm' is a good goal, but these social processes are hard to predict, as demonstrated for instance by the sudden swell of the Arab Spring.

4.1.2. Bias towards formalised and organised civil society

Actors in the arena where social change takes place and where social dynamics play out go beyond the formally organised CSOs familiar to donors. These 'traditional' partners include faith-based groups,²⁵ trade unions, community organisations, social movements and politicians. Yet, less formal CSOs, and those that are more strongly rooted in societies, play a major role in societal dynamics and in effecting social change. Nonetheless, it remains difficult and risky for donors and international civil society to reach, support and strengthen the more idiosyncratic southern expressions of civil society. Indeed, donor funding is therefore still focused on the usual development actors (e.g., NGOs), especially international NGOs and southern urban-based NGOs. Smaller, informally organised and rural-based CSOs are less successful at accessing funds, even though they are potentially stronger actors for social change (World Bank 2006).

Understandably, donors and northern partners prefer to align themselves with those organisations whose values they share. However, this leads to a difficult predicament, as such CSOs may have limited or no outreach. They may lack any genuine roots in society, which will hamper their effectiveness and create a civil society that is increasingly skewed, artificial and non-representative. Organisations that are strongly rooted in society but which underwrite values that are non-palatable to western sensibilities may have a better chance of affecting lasting changes in society. These changes may not be exactly what we in the West would prefer, but they may nonetheless be an improvement from the current situation. External actors need to seriously rethink how far they are willing to trade ideology for pragmatism; this is a question long overdue.

²⁵ See, for instance, Hauck (2010) on the role of churches in creating social capital and improving governance in Papua New Guinea.

4.1.3. The myth of a value-neutral civil society

The issues raised so far are difficult for donors and northern partners to adequately address. But this does not mean that they should refrain from supporting those civil society organisations that explicitly advocate for social change. Narrowing their engagement to 'development-type' NGOs and taking an instrumental view of civil society organisations cannot work in practice, for two reasons. The first reason is that 'value-neutral' organisations do not exist. CSOs set their agenda and formulate their own value statements, objectives and strategies. They seldom restrict themselves to playing just one role. Instead, they combine a number of functions and activities.

The second reason is that interventions and initiatives are unlikely to be sustainable in the long run, an issue well known to development practitioners. Research has shown that the legitimacy and accountability of the actors involved is a crucial factor in the success and sustainability of voice and accountability initiatives (ODI 2007). This means that strategies and activities need to be adapted to a realistic pace of change that is determined by the absorption capacity of the communities and not by the demands of donors. External support may create incentives to develop projects that are not genuinely rooted in endogenous processes. As noted earlier, CSOs that receive external support may fall victim to perverse accountability demands, becoming more accountable to donors than to the communities they serve (Fischer 2006). Such dynamics may even crowd out organisations that are genuinely rooted in society. There is a real need for donors and civil society partners to ensure that their activities to strengthen voice and accountability remain connected to endogenous processes and capacities.

The importance of having a vibrant endogenous civil society can hardly be overstated. But the risks are also high. This field of engagement requires a new way of thinking about the risks of action and the risks of inaction.

4.2. How external support can weaken southern civil society

A new way of gauging the risks of action and inaction will need to be found in supporting southern civil society, and this will also require a rethinking of current mechanisms through which southern civil society is supported in fragile states. Mechanisms of support for civil society are not yet designed in such a way as to facilitate the emergence of a more endogenous civil society; they may even undermine it. Donor policy on civil society seldom makes an explicit distinction between northern and southern civil society. To some degree, this is understandable, in view of the increasingly blurred distinction between an endogenous 'southern civil society' and a 'northern civil society'. This blurring stems partly from the stronger transnational linkages between civil society at the micro and macro levels. But it is also caused by the often relatively artificial nature of 'southern civil society', particularly in situations with little civil society to start with and an abundance of northern funding.

It therefore remains important to focus on the means of external engagement, especially how the presence of northern civil society interacts with the emergence of a stronger southern civil society.

4.2.1. Legitimacy and perverse incentives

A problem faced by civil society organisations is the multitude of stakeholders to which they are accountable. Civil society organisations are accountable to donors for their resources, to their constituents for their overall mission, to clients for delivery of goods and services, and to government agencies for compliance with regulations. Dealing with diverse accountability claims may be extremely difficult. Where stakeholders have different or contradictory interests, being fully accountable to all of them is impossible (Brown and Jagadananda 2007).

External support for endogenous initiatives can lead to a shift in accountability from local community members to donors. It may even create 'empty shell' CSOs that are not anchored in society and lack any real legitimacy. The behaviour of CSOs then becomes determined by their relations with their northern partners and donors, and not by accountability to citizens (IOB 2011, Paffenholz 2009, Rombouts 2006). It has even been suggested that external funding of forms of collective action can reduce volunteerism and the genuine expression of citizens' endogenous collective action (Paffenholz 2009). This is particularly important in fragile states, where the capacity for collective action has often already been weakened by conflict and destruction of social capital. Thus, engagement of external actors may stifle active citizen engagement, rather than increase it. These risks are again not easily mitigated. No silver bullet exists. But paying closer attention to sources of legitimacy is an important starting point, as will be discussed in more detail later.

4.2.2. Equality and autonomy in North-South partnerships

Weak capacity is prevalent amongst southern CSOs. In addition to weaknesses in administration and management capabilities, research shows that southern CSOs often have difficulty formulating and expressing their vision and identifying opportunities to influence policy processes (World Bank 2005, Mundy et al. 2010, IOB 2011), and they often have little capacity to conduct policy analysis and advocacy (IOB 2011). Research conducted by the World Bank found low technical and fiduciary capacities amongst southern CSOs in Togo, Angola and Guinea Bissau (World Bank 2005). Yet, the capacity of southern CSOs has increased significantly in recent years and will continue to rise (World Bank 2005, WRR 2010, Nijs & Renard 2009).

In light of the growth in capacity of southern civil society, coupled with these organisations' increasing demands for more autonomy from their northern partners, the relationships between northern and southern civil society will need to undergo significant transformations (Keystone 2011, World Bank 2005). Research and perception surveys have repeatedly shown that the partnership relation between northern NGOs and southern CSOs continues to be an unequal one, and northern partners still play a strong role in setting the agendas of their southern partners (Keystone 2011, IOB 2011).

4.2.3. Sustained support to capacity development

Capacity development of southern CSOs is hampered by a lack of sustained support and often volatile financing arrangements (Giffen & Judge 2010, Keijzer et al. 2011). Furthermore, few, if any, southern CSOs have their own capacity development strategy (IOB 2011). A recent evaluation of Dutch support to civil society capacity building found that southern CSOs typically lack an outcome statement, a theory of change, a policy on capacity development and a monitoring and evaluation system that allows for measurement of results (ibid.). However, this weakness is mirrored in northern NGOs, which also tend to lack strategies for capacity development, for themselves and for their partners (ibid.).

These weaknesses are perpetuated by the fact that few donors hold the NGOs they fund accountable for progress in actually building the capacity of southern partners. This may, however, be changing. The Netherlands and Belgium recently adopted the '5-C' approach for tracking the results of northern partners' capacity development support to southern partners.²⁶ The 5-C framework looks beyond formal capacities to deliver development results (such as technical and managerial competencies) to other factors that drive organisational and system behaviour. It identifies five core capabilities that enable an organisation or system to perform and survive: (1) to commit and engage, (2) to carry out technical service delivery and logistical tasks, (3) to relate and attract resources and support, (4) to adapt and self-renew and (5) to

²⁶ For a recent reference document on CSO capacity development see IOB (2011) and Keijzer et al. (2011).

balance coherence and diversity. It thus helps stakeholders to diagnose capacity strengths and weaknesses, to monitor capacity changes over time, and to contribute to organisational learning (ECDPM 2008).

To date, the 5-C framework has been used mainly in ex post evaluations. But if properly applied, it could be used in capacity development planning as well. For example, in a collaborative process, northern and southern partners would identify weaknesses and ways to strengthen the relevant systems and capabilities, to incrementally build towards increased capacity of the southern CSO (Keijzer et al. 2011).²⁷

4.2.4. Competition for resources and crowding out

In some countries, the service delivery and poverty alleviation arena is a crowded space in which southern and northern CSOs compete for resources. Northern NGOs with northern CSOs (or their national charters) tend to have a competitive edge (WRR 2010, IOB 2011).²⁸

Southern CSOs are often assumed to have a weaker capacity to deliver quality services than northern CSOs. However, Southern CSOs may have a major advantage over their northern partners in delivering services in insecure areas, as well as in ensuring that services reach the people most in need. Their better understanding of the local political economy and knowledge of existing pockets of accountability give them a competitive edge.²⁹ Despite these considerations, donors continue to place relatively greater emphasis on the administrative aspects of capacity, thereby causing southern CSOs to be crowded out (IOB 2011, WRR 2010).

Local embeddedness and ownership are generally less valued than an ability to meet donor requirements in proposal writing and reporting. Domestic groups are thus left distracted to these tasks or placed in a weak and subordinate position (Fischer 2011). Bringing in appraisal criteria that are centred on legitimacy and rootedness in society can start to redress this imbalance.

Service provision by CSOs can also lead to a competition for skilled labour, both between northern and southern civil society and between civil society and government or public sector (World Bank 2005, WRR 2010). Northern civil society organisations absorb scarce capacity, with workers attracted by salaries and benefits that are typically better than those available in local and less formal southern CSOs or in the public service. This may weaken both the more endogenous civil society and government.

²⁷ However, risks are associated with using a methodology like the 5-Cs for monitoring purposes: it may become a tool to hold northern NGOs accountable for capacity of the southern CSO and it may become an exercise in 'ticking the right boxes', reducing the real ownership of the southern CSO over the process. Monitoring methodologies can ensure that the true perspective of the southern partner gets heard, for instance, through self-assessments.

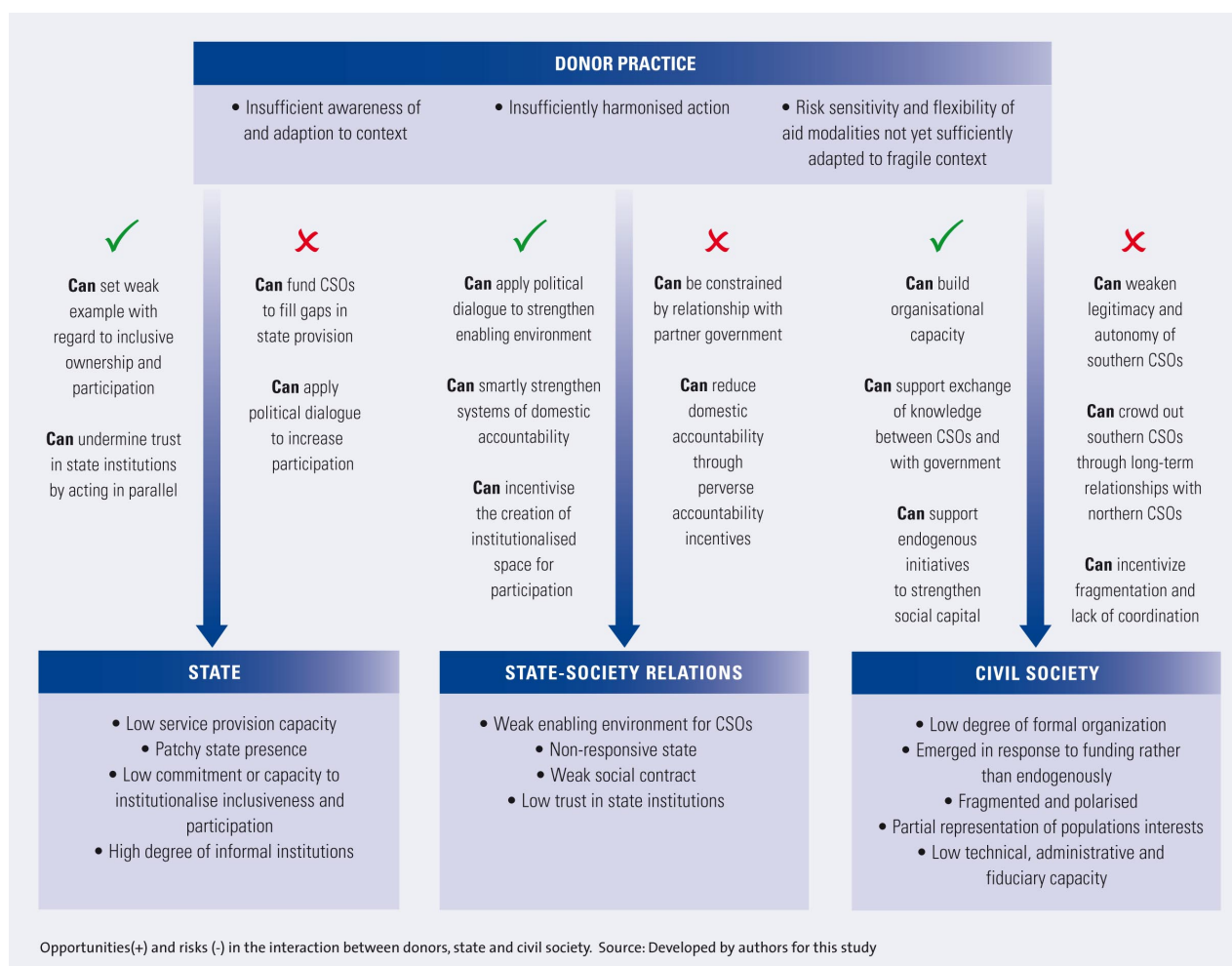
²⁸ There are also concerns of inefficiency in this crowded space, as multi-layered processes of sub-contracting are often used. In one comprehensive study in the eastern DRC it was found that small CSOs although capable often had funding pass through up to five agencies before the implementing projects (Eastern Congo Initiative 2011).

²⁹ Of course, there is another side to this coin. Since southern CSOs are often rooted in a particular part of society, their impartiality and breadth of their coverage of vulnerable populations cannot be automatically assumed and needs to be carefully assessed.

5. Engaging with civil society in fragile states

Chapters 3 and 4 provided an overview of the importance of civil society in fragile states and the roles that civil society can play in supporting a transition out of fragility or conflict. A number of pitfalls and thorny issues were also presented that require specific consideration. Some of these issues pertain more widely, but do emerge more strongly in fragile states than in a ‘regular’ development context. Other issues are relevant mainly to fragile states and countries coming out of conflict. Figure 2 summarises some of the donor practices covered, along with the commiserate risks and opportunities, in particular, with regard to the state and civil society.

Figure 2: Donor practice, risks and opportunities



Source: Developed by authors for this study

Dealing with these particular challenges requires some rethinking of ways to engage with civil society in fragile states. From this analysis, a number of principles for engaging with civil society in fragile states can be derived. These will be discussed in section 5.1.

The increased capacity of southern civil society, their demands for autonomy, new ways of thinking about capacity development of southern CSOs, and new opportunities for networking between northern and southern civil society all point to the need to reconsider the role played by northern NGOs in civil society. Furthermore, if a strong and vibrant civil society is important in fragile states – and, indeed, a main

objective of external support – the question arises of what the comparative advantage of northern CSOs is in fragile contexts? Section 5.2 addresses this question.

5.1. Key principles for engaging with civil society

5.1.1. Engaging with CSOs as a political act

Throughout this discussion paper it has become clear that engaging with CSOs is always a political act. To engage with civil society in a fragile state one must fully embrace the fact that this means intervening in local power dynamics and state-society relations. One of the most important factors for effective citizen engagement and for the capacity of civil society to hold the state to account is the presence of an enabling environment for civil society. External actors need to emphasise political or policy dialogue to ensure there is sufficient institutionalised space.

At the same time, they should be careful not to impose their views of how civil society ‘should look’ but rather work with what is there. A strategy of engaging with civil society should strike the right balance between being value-based and pragmatic. The donor must be clear about what values it is willing to support and ensure that its partners share these. This means rethinking the balance between ideology and pragmatism, and weighing the benefits of supporting endogenous forces, even if they do not fully meet the values of the external actors. A careful evaluation of these value systems is necessary for the supporting external actor to be able and willing to back the southern partner when the going gets rough.

As such, there is an inherent political risk in engaging with civil society. However, this risk of action needs to be measured against the risk of inaction, as not engaging with CSOs brings its own risks. These include a reduced information flow from the field and narrow reliance on government as the sole local partner. These risks are significant, in particular against the backdrop of a global civil society that is increasingly holding governments to account for the consequences of their actions for human rights.

5.1.2. Smart strategies for engaging with civil society

The understanding that engaging with civil society is by definition a political act stems from the recognition that CSOs are actors in their own right. There is still a prevalent tendency – exacerbated by the current statebuilding paradigm – to treat civil society as an instrument in the toolbox, to be utilised to reach strategic goals in a planned manner. However, even when donors contract CSOs for the instrumental role of service delivery, they are still engaging with entities that perform more than one role and that espouse and embody certain values. Too often an organisation is contracted in an instrumental role, without due consideration for the legitimacy the organisation has in the community.

Engaging with civil society therefore requires ‘smart strategies’, which are more an art than a science. Knowledge of the political economy and the conflict context is key and must be central to strategies for engaging with civil society. This includes the range and variety of civil society actors; their capacity, legitimacy and representativeness; social cohesiveness; and their relation to the drivers of conflict, the fissures in society and the ways these have been instrumentalised.

Furthermore, focus should not be too exclusively on civil society organisations ‘as we know them’. Different expressions of civil society can be engaged with in a variety of ways. Informal and formal institutions need to be brought in and linked together in new ways that can gradually introduce stronger state-society relations, strengthening civil society as an arena for societal dynamics. In order to contribute – or at least to not undermine – the emergence of an endogenous southern civil society, partnerships need to be sought with a much more varied range of actors than is currently the case. Donors’ internal funding mechanisms

and procedures often militate against more involvement of such a variety of civil society actors. ‘Capacity development’ of donors to work more effectively with civil society therefore also merits attention.

5.1.3. Focus on legitimacy and accountability

Literature shows that efficiency and accountability criteria often outweigh the criteria of ownership and legitimacy (Norad 2008). This reduces the eligibility of many of the more informal southern civil society groups for external support. Including criteria of legitimacy and ownership in eligibility for funding may well tip the scales towards southern CSOs and redress some of the asymmetries in access to resources between northern and southern organisations.

The concept of ‘legitimacy’ refers to perceptions by key stakeholders that the existence, activities and impacts of CSOs are justifiable and appropriate in terms of central social values and institutions of the society of which they are part (Brown and Jagadananda 2007). Several forms of legitimacy can be distinguished³⁰ (box 2). Which is the most important source of legitimacy will depend on the mission and objectives of the organisation. For instance, for service delivery, legitimacy is mostly determined by the ability of the organisation to perform the tasks set for it. For an organisation involved in peacebuilding, moral legitimacy is of higher value. For advocacy and interest-based organisations, political legitimacy will be paramount (Brown and Jagadananda 2007). It is therefore advisable to consider which source of legitimacy a civil society organisation must have in order to perform a particular role well. This should then become part of the eligibility requirements for support.

Box 2: Sources of legitimacy

- **Legal legitimacy.** Compliance with legal and regulatory requirements
- **Political legitimacy.** For democratic legitimacy, the processes that allow those represented to participate in decisions, to influence results and to hold organisation leaders accountable
- **Moral legitimacy.** Rooted in action on behalf of widely held moral values and norms
- **Technical or performance legitimacy.** Expertise, knowledge or competence relevant to a certain issue

Source: Adapted from Rao and Naidoo, 2004

Continued legitimacy is crucial for a sustainable and effective civil society organisation. It is therefore vital for a CSO to have a strategic plan for managing their legitimacy and their systems of accountability. Such accountability systems include the identification of key stakeholders, definitions of performance and legitimacy, and mechanisms for making the CSO accountable to their key stakeholders for their results (Brown and Jagadananda 2007). Donors and their partners could support CSOs in developing such strategic plans for managing their accountability systems effectively.

5.1.4. Maintaining focus on strengthening capacity

If a key goal is the emergence of a southern civil society as an arena for channelling societal dynamics, then strengthening the capacity of southern CSOs must remain at the centre of attention. Capacity is best built through doing. Therefore, southern CSOs should be the first actor of choice once their capacity has reached a minimum level. Programme and core funding should be promoted where possible, as this provides the best opportunities for capacity development.

Although the capacity of southern CSOs has substantially increased in recent years (World Bank 2005, WRR 2010, Nijs & Renard 2009), weaknesses are still prevalent in fragile states. A focus on capacity development of southern CSOs therefore remains important. If capacity development is conducted through

³⁰ CIVICUS uses a slightly different categorisation of sources of legitimacy: legal legitimacy, normative legitimacy, pragmatic legitimacy and cognitive legitimacy (Brown and Jagadananda 2007)

partnerships with northern NGOs, a capacity development strategy needs to be put in place and capacity development goals need to be formulated, monitored and subsequently evaluated.

Other avenues for capacity development could also be explored. Capacity development is now increasingly incorporated as a component of basket funds and other joint civil society funding modalities. An innovative idea is to channel funding directly to southern CSOs, with the provision that they acquire their own capacity development assistance. They may then choose to partner with northern NGOs, for example, to gain benefits such as access to a broader policy arena and increased legitimacy. This modality would create more autonomy for the southern CSO and build a more competitive market for northern NGOs (Du Pont 2012). Other mechanisms that contribute to capacity development of southern CSOs are platforms for South-South dialogue and collaboration, horizontal learning networks and joint capacity development and training events (see, e.g., Dowst 2009, World Bank 2005).

5.1.5. Increased coherence and complementarity where appropriate

The many – and increasing – donors and other funding sources generate an ever-growing number of civil society initiatives, which often leads to fragmentation, confusion and reduced synergy. A significant reduction in fragmentation needs to be sought.

It is important to make a distinction between northern and southern civil society when aiming for increased coherence and complementarity. Southern civil society is not something we can control – or should want to. A vibrant civil society is one that emerges endogenously and reflects the variety in society. Its strength lies in this spontaneous nature and variety. Northern civil society does not represent endogenous forces in the South, and neither do southern CSOs that are primarily focused on service delivery and sustainable economic regeneration. Their presence on the ground is often a response to financial incentives. They may compete with and crowd out more endogenous southern CSOs. Many northern NGOs benefit from long-term established funding relationships with their home-country governments. They thus constitute a powerful set of actors on the ground, perhaps adding to the fragmentation of interventions.

A consolidation of northern (and to some degree southern) actors on the ground is recommended. In addition, harmonisation of civil society initiatives can be promoted.

5.1.6. Critical thinking about the relative importance of alignment and harmonisation

In discussing sustainable economic development and poverty alleviation the question of alignment with country strategies comes up very explicitly. When is a harmonised approach in order? When is alignment with government strategies in order? How and when can civil society initiatives complement other types of support to a fragile state? Can such complementarity be strategically planned, or should it be allowed to emerge on the basis of soft guidance? When should CSO activities not be curtailed by such requirements?

There are no neat answers to these questions, but box 3 lists some key factors that are important to consider.

Box 3: Factors influencing decisions on alignment and harmonisation

1. The ideal and de facto degree of regulatory control of the state³¹ in a particular sector:
 - There is a greater need for alignment in areas where the state has a monopoly (e.g., security and justice).
 - There is a moderate need for alignment, but a strong need for harmonisation, in areas where the state has some regulatory control (such as education and health).
 - There is less need for alignment and harmonisation in areas where state has no regulatory control (such as peacebuilding, voice and accountability, policy advocacy and human rights monitoring).
2. Presence of a national or sectoral strategy or programme, and inclusivity and transparency of formulation and consultation processes.
3. Desirability of autonomy versus harmonisation:
 - There is a greater need for harmonisation where there is an agreed and sufficiently proven, joint approach by other actors in the area of work, especially when space for innovation is created.
 - There is less need for harmonisation when initiatives are locally originated and highly specific to the immediate context.³²
4. Presence of humanitarian imperatives that warrant attention. For instance, the presence of neglected communities that have fallen through the cracks of national strategies.³³

5.1.7. Southern-based learning networks and 'local' best practice

Through experience gained over time and in different contexts, civil society has gained strong knowledge of effective and innovative approaches for sustainable development, conflict transformation and poverty alleviation. This expertise is an asset and can inform project design in a variety of contexts. It is important to note that a careful balance needs to be sought between international best practice and localised best practice. International best practice cannot be copied. Rather, a blending is needed, of international experience and understanding of the local context. The balance between these two has a tendency to tip towards international best practice rather than to the local context.

This imbalance may be partially due to the way knowledge is shared. Most knowledge exchange networks are concentrated in the countries of origin of the northern CSOs rather than in the fragile states themselves. Expanding southern-based knowledge networks is therefore an important instrument for facilitating exchange of knowledge and information. Southern CSOs could strongly benefit from more southern-oriented platforms for knowledge sharing and learning. The contributions of such platforms to the strength of civil society could be especially great if they lead to the creation and adoption of 'local best practice'. This is an area where external actors should place more focus.

5.1.8. External drivers of fragility

Civil society organisations, especially northern ones, play an important role in agenda setting and influencing policy in the global arena. As such they can make significant contributions to addressing cross-cutting issues and external drivers of conflict and weak governance. Several specialist international NGOs have been founded in recent years to provide knowledge, information and advocacy for addressing global stresses. These range from Transparency International, which deals with corruption, to the International Crisis Group and International Alert, which focus on responses to conflict and peacebuilding, and Global Witness, which addresses issues of natural resource-related conflict and corruption. External stresses remain a major contributor to conflict and fragility, especially in weak states. Multi-stakeholder approaches

³¹ Note that these lines are often blurred and highly dependent on state capacity and commitment. This is and will remain a political judgement.

³² In this scenario, sharing of information and experience remains important.

³³ Acute emergency situations of course also warrant immediate civil society attention, especially if no national strategies or response capacity exists. We have however excluded humanitarian emergency situations from scope of this paper.

for increased accountability are also rising in importance, such as the FLEGT initiative (Forest Law Enforcement, Government and Trade) of the European Union. These can contribute to an emergent global system of transparency and accountability.

5.2. A changing role for northern CSOs

If a strong and vibrant civil society is important in fragile states – and a main objective of external support – the question arises of what comparative advantage northern CSOs have in fragile contexts. What added value do northern CSOs bring compared to their southern counterparts? Are these advantages likely to increase or dwindle in importance?

5.2.1. Reducing external stresses

Northern civil society organisations play an important role in agenda setting, in developing norms and standards, and in influencing policy in the global arena. They also make significant contributions to addressing cross-cutting issues and external drivers of conflict and weak governance, which is paramount in fragile states. Civil society initiatives, both international and regional have surfaced as important actors in multi-stakeholder approaches as well. These types of governance mechanisms are expected to continue to grow in number and importance. Linkages between northern and southern civil society can increase the leverage and impact of these initiatives, and create valuable nodes in an emerging global civil society network. This role of northern civil society organisations is therefore likely to increase in importance.

5.2.2. Information flow, thematic expertise and policy analysis capability

Northern civil society has a distinct ability to harness information from the grassroots level and feed this into the policy domain. Through partner organisations in the South, they have ears and eyes on the ground. In addition, they bring a policy analysis capacity and accumulated thematic expertise. This allows them to form a grounded and independent judgement, which they bring into the public domain. This harnessing of grassroots information and independent policy analysis and feeding it into the national and global arena is a role that will likely remain important in the future. However, the relationships between northern and southern actors will need to change.

5.2.3. Knowledge of 'best practices' and innovative approaches

Northern NGOs have a store of knowledge about best practices and innovative approaches in working with communities. Indeed, research shows that the most innovative solutions have tended to come from northern NGOs (World Bank 2005). In fragile states, in particular, this knowledge of best practices is beneficial. Northern NGOs do have added value in this regard, as they can lend their knowledge of international best practice and innovative approaches to southern CSOs. The effectiveness of this function, however, will depend on northern organisations' ability to transfer this knowledge to southern CSOs and to contribute towards identification and ground-testing of innovative blends of international best practice with local conditions.

Their role will therefore need to morph towards knowledge exchange capacity and provision of ideas, rather than direct (or even indirect) implementation. Nonetheless, due to the increasing capacity of local actors, coupled with the greater technological possibilities for southern civil society organisations to obtain knowledge directly, this is a relatively important but shrinking role for northern CSOs.

5.2.4. Support to capacity development of southern CSOs

Capacity development remains an important goal, and northern CSOs can play an important role in this regard. However, concerns remain about asymmetries in partnerships and risks of crowding out.

Northern partners therefore need to increasingly focus their interventions on facilitation and nurturing capacity development strategies. The '5-C' approach mentioned earlier is a good way of measuring endogenous capacity development. The autonomy and agenda-setting power of southern CSOs vis-à-vis the northern partner can thus be monitored over time.

However, long-term partnerships with northern NGOs are not the only possible mechanism for capacity development of southern CSOs. Other innovative mechanisms will likely increasingly come into play, and direct funding of southern CSOs may increase. Southern-based knowledge networks are also likely to arise, particularly as technology spreads wider and the ability of southern CSOs to engage in these networks increases. Thus, the capacity development role of northern NGOs with regard to southern CSOs is probably a shrinking one.

5.2.5. Knowledge brokerage: Knowing who is who

When it is important to select the right CSOs in terms of legitimacy and representativeness, a strong knowledge of the civil society landscape is required. Compared to donors,³⁴ northern NGOs with a long history in a country as well as with their partners often have an added value in terms of their knowledge of the landscape. They tend to be more impartial than domestic actors, though they are not entirely free of bias.³⁵ Nonetheless, in spite of any such partiality, a recent evaluation of Dutch NGOs involved in conflict transformation found that their choice of partners – although not at all systematic – was one of their main strengths (Partos 2008).³⁶

This role is expected to continue to be relevant. As support to southern civil society is likely to increase, northern civil society could play a growing role in selection and vetting of southern civil society partners.

5.2.6. Ability to operate in relative autonomy

An additional advantage of northern NGOs is that they are a step farther removed from the partner government than the donor itself. They therefore have more freedom to fund and engage with CSOs that may be critical of the government. Donor governments are more closely tied to partner-country governments through their diplomatic relations, and also through the principles of the aid effectiveness agenda, the 'New Deal' in particular. This binds the hands of donor governments to some degree, leaving civil society with more space to act independently.

³⁴ Donors themselves should invest more in understanding the civil society landscape, in order to better understand the implications of their actors and enable them to act more as political actors. Yet, even with increased insight they are as yet far removed from fully understanding the landscape and being able to make well-founded decisions on who to engage with. This is particularly the case in fragile states given that embassies and international agencies in these countries often have high staff turnover.

³⁵ This bias depends to a large extent on the way the partners have been selected. The fact that partnerships often have historical roots or are related to identity or religious communities with which they identify tends to limit their broader scanning of the civil society landscape. The selection processes are generally not based on a comprehensive understanding of all actors in the playing field.

³⁶ Nowadays, northern NGOs are increasingly asked to be strategic and transparent in their choice of partners. External actors must strike a balance here between allowing for a good, almost intuitive understanding of the playing field and enforcing a more systematic approach to partner selection when their funds are used.

Considering the general trend towards a shrinking enabling environment for civil society in many states, the role for northern civil society as a relatively independent partner of southern civil society is likely to increase.

6. Conclusion

An active civil society is essential in fragile states. It can play a key role in creating or rebuilding social cohesion and mending the social fabric, which is often ruptured in situations of conflict. At the same time, civil society is the arena in which societal debate takes place, and it thus represents a deeply contested space in which societal asymmetries are reflected. Fragile states often have societal fault lines, expressed in conflict or simply in a lack of overarching and inclusive institutions. In these contexts, civil society also tends to be fragmented and polarised. Civil society mirrors the power asymmetries that are prevalent in society. In addition, civil society is often weakly organised in fragile states, and its capacity to aggregate citizens' preferences, to conduct policy analysis, and to influence policy in the national or global arena is correspondingly limited.

Nonetheless, civil society has vital roles to play in fragile states. Broadening participation of citizens in national development strategies is one key role, in particular, in contexts where development assistance is provided by the international community. With an increased commitment of donor countries to the 'New Deal' and adequate implementation of its principles of prioritising country strategies and country systems, this role becomes even more important. In addition, civil society organisations can fill gaps in implementation capacity on the ground. Availability of basic services can help to rebuild confidence in state institutions, reinstating the notion of a social contract. Rebuilding vertical relations of trust between the state and its citizens hinges on citizens' ability to hold the state to account. Civil society cannot – and should not – perform this role alone or in isolation; rather, it should perform its part as one of a number of important players. Civil society's role in peacebuilding and conflict transformation is highly significant, as it can help to build the foundations for increased societal capacity to manage conflict and tensions constructively and non-violently. Finally, civil society is more than a collection of civil society organisations doing their thing; it is also an arena in which societal forces can be expressed and negotiated, and where incremental social change can take shape.

However, as important as civil society may be, it is often polarised and fragmented, posing real challenges for external actors to engage in this field. Engaging with civil society in fragile states is far from risk-free, and a conflict-sensitive approach is essential. A conflict-sensitive approach requires a deep understanding of the civil society landscape and of the political context surrounding it, at both the micro and the macro levels. Engaging with civil society in fragile states, therefore, also requires an acknowledgement of the political nature of the engagement. For external partners, especially donor governments, this entails a willingness to show the necessary political commitment. A weak enabling environment for civil society in many fragile states seriously impedes the effectiveness of civil society in its roles of aggregating citizens' preferences and translating these into national policies and strategies. Donor governments have a role to play here through political and policy dialogue, although they should not overestimate their influence.

External actors – donor governments, bilateral and multilateral agencies, and northern civil society organisations – need to be careful not to impose their views of what civil society is (or should be) onto social contexts that have their own dynamics and their own expressions of citizen engagement. Inflows of funds and selective mechanisms of partner selection by northern NGOs may create an 'artificial' civil

society that is a mirror of civil society in the West rather than an expression of societal forces on the ground.

The political and thorny nature of engagement with civil society in fragile states often leads to a narrow focus on those civil society organisations that speak the familiar language of development or civil rights. However, there is a far broader range of actors that may perhaps be more deeply rooted in society and can meaningfully contribute to value-driven social change. External actors will need to seek 'smart partnerships' with civil society of various natures and look creatively for ways to strengthen state-society relations through engagement with a broad variety of existing actors and formal and informal institutions.

If the aim is to strengthen the southern civil society arena, then issues of competition between northern and southern CSOs need to be addressed, especially the unequal partnerships and lack of autonomy of southern CSOs. Capacity development should be tackled more strategically, incorporating strategies for southern NGOs to more effectively manage competing claims for their accountability. Funding mechanisms need to reduce the degree to which they shift accountability relations from citizens to partner organisations and donors. Innovative funding mechanisms are imaginable, such as direct funding of southern CSOs, enabling them to acquire their own capacity development support. South-South cooperation and increased South-North knowledge exchange can also support capacity development.

A final point that must be addressed is the fragmentation and lack of coherence amongst the multitudes of civil society initiatives. This is not to say that southern civil society should be curtailed or put in a straitjacket, as southern civil society is an expression of existing forces that themselves come in different shapes and strengths. However, in reality, much of southern civil society is created by outside funding; thus the fragmentation is to a large degree caused by incentives from abroad. Measures can be put in place that reduce fragmentation, increase coherence and maximise synergies between different civil society initiatives and even with the state. Southern-based knowledge-sharing and learning platforms can provide an important vehicle for this. Most knowledge sharing is still based in the North, from where learning flows to the policy arena abroad, rather than horizontally to other actors struggling with the same problems. Platforms for horizontal knowledge sharing and learning could catalyse the emergence of '*local* best practice', as opposed to international best practice, which is only of limited use in a specific local context.

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This publication benefits from the generous support of ECDPM's core institutional and programme funders: The Netherlands, Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Luxemburg, Portugal, Sweden, Switerland, and the United Kingdom (DFID).

ISSN 1571-7577

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