



THE PARIS DECLARATION:

HOW CSO TRANSPARENCY AND INFORMATION CAN INCREASE DEMOCRATIC OWNERSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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INTRODUCTION

The Paris Declaration (PD) signed in March 2005 publicly and officially recognises the commitment of donor and recipient countries to improve aid effectiveness by reforming aid management through 5 principles: ownership, alignment, harmonisation, managing for results, and mutual accountability.

The PD is an important step towards establishing an international consensus on aid, yet its ability to make aid work in the long term is questionable. While the principles of ownership and accountability have been welcomed by civil society organisations (CSOs) as the bedrock of reform, arguably these principles receive the least attention and the concept of ownership is limited to donor and recipient governments¹. For example, in spite of general recognition of the role CSOs play as vital development actors nationally and globally, they are still to be systematically included under the PD framework.

With the Third High Level Forum (HLF3) on Aid Effectiveness in Ghana this September fast approaching, this article argues that a broader principle of ownership should be recognised in the Accra Agenda for Action (AAA) to make the process of development under the PD framework genuinely democratic. As an important element of this, CSOs must be systematically engaged in national development policy making processes; their proper inclusion will be critical if the PD is to be a useful tool for policy-makers, rather than one that has little or no root in the realities of local communities. We further argue that for this to become a reality, the capacity of policy makers to identify and engage with CSOs must be increased. A first step in this regard is to ensure that reliable, comprehensive sources of information on these organisations are publicly available.

OWNERSHIP OR EXCLUSION?

The Paris Declaration focuses on increasing country ownership of the aid process, which itself must be informed by the national context. In the PD, partner countries commit to *"Encourag[ing] the broad participation of a range of national actors in setting development priorities"*². Nonetheless, there has been a tendency to limit country ownership to government-to-government relationships between donors and the more technical branches of recipient governments³. This limited point of view marginalises other crucial development actors such as parliamentarians and CSOs, all of whom are connected to (and in the case of parliamentarians are elected by) citizens with significant stakes in the development process.

This is highly problematic, as any country is larger than its government.

1 "Turning the Tables – Aid and accountability under the Paris Framework", Eurodad - European Network on debt & development, A civil society report, April 2008, p. 6

2 The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness – Ownership, Harmonisation, Alignment, Results and Mutual Accountability, High Level Forum, Paris 28 February - 2 March 2005, article 38

3 "Enhancing Democratic Ownership of Development Processes: A perspective from the South", Remarks made at the Copenhagen Conference on Enriching the Paris Declaration, Mutava Musyimi, Kenyan Member of Parliament, 13 May 2008

A study published by Eurodad in April this year, argues that this marginalisation is due to two inter-related problems: *“insufficient space at the table and concerns about the quality of the dialogue”*⁴. National government administrations are already burdened with donors’ constant engagement, and many national administrators are not accustomed to (or interested in) substantive engagement with civil society, which often results in formal representation by CSOs with no substance. A recently published Alliance2015 report reached the same conclusion in their four country study; if CSOs are included they often have the role as “listener[s]” or observers for administrators to be able to tick the “CSO participation box”⁵.

For the PD to achieve its aims and ensure real ownership and ultimate effectiveness of development processes, governments and donors alike must strive for a diversity of representation by including all development actors and ensuring the establishment of legitimate governance mechanisms for decision-making processes. Unless those closest to the action have a say in what resources are needed and how they are allocated, it is unlikely that development aid will succeed in supporting the development of society and meeting the needs of its citizens. As explained by the Advisory Group on Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness, CSOs must play a vital role in this process:

*“CSOs are often particularly effective at reaching the poor and socially excluded, mobilizing community efforts, speaking up for human rights and gender equality, and helping to empower particular constituencies. Their strength lies not in their representation of society as a whole, but in their diversity and capacity for innovation, and in the different perspectives that they bring to issues when engaging in policy dialogue. CSOs are often major policy providers and major players in helping the poor to organize themselves. Policy dialogue and cooperation between governments and CSOs allows greater articulation of their actions under national development strategies and programs.”*⁶

Genuine CSO engagement is crucial to informing policy as these organisations have specialist and well-informed knowledge (both geographically and/or according to issue area), which central government cannot otherwise reach. If policy is developed with this broader input, a national sense of ownership with attendant results is more likely.

CIVIL SOCIETY LEADING THE WAY

While CSOs have become more involved in decision making at the governmental level over recent years, this is primarily the result of their own efforts⁷, not a result of national policy. Even if the political will and commitment to engage exists, a lack of capacity on both sides creates barriers to meaningful dialogue. In this respect CSOs are faced with many challenges; CSO ‘impact’ is the nominal ‘Holy Grail’ sought by public and private donors alike but is notoriously difficult to measure and demonstrate. Moreover, detractors continue to raise questions of credibility, accountability and legitimacy of CSOs. The arguments for and against are well rehearsed and beyond the scope of this article, yet even before these demands are made, the information vacuum with regard to CSO activities and accomplishments is a major disability when promoting more inclusive CSO policies. In most countries this dearth of information

4 “Turning the Tables – Aid and accountability under the Paris Framework”, Eurodad - European Network on debt & development, A civil society report, April 2008 , p. 26

5 “Fostering Democratic Ownership – Towards Greater Impact on Poverty”, An Alliance 2015 Report, April 2008, p. 21

6 “Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness – Synthesis of Findings and Recommendations”, Advisory group on Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness (AG-CS), Second working draft April 16, 2008, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/ACCRAEXT/Resources/4700790-1208545462880/AG-CS-Synthesis-of-Findings-and-Recommendations.pdf>

7 Preliminary findings of the International Evaluation on Ownership, Mutual Accountability and Civil Society, Secretariat for the international evaluation of the Paris Declaration, DIIS Danish Institute for International Studies, Remarks made at the Copenhagen Conference on Enriching the Paris Declaration 13 May 2008

makes it difficult for donors or policy makers to be confident or consistent in their CSO engagements. This results in the ‘usual suspects’ being funded or invited to participate in consultations, leaving many groups disenfranchised (especially smaller, rural based CSOs). For civil society to assume a meaningful role in policymaking, it is important that information about its components and work is accessible to the policy makers as well as to the general public.

There are clearly multiple demands for CSO transparency and accountability, and CSOs recognise and, increasingly, welcome the opportunity to articulate their work to a diverse audience. At sectoral, national and international levels therefore there is an ever growing (and at times mind-boggling) array of self-regulatory mechanisms and tools. These range from accreditation schemes to codes of conduct and performance measures⁸. These self-regulatory tools are important as they can be developed with sensitivity to the specific contexts in which CSOs operate, thus enabling these organisations themselves, not regulators and donors, to set the reporting agenda. Given the proliferation of various accountability tools, however, it is difficult to gain a clear and common view of who’s who, who’s doing what, how and where. Marianna Török points out therefore, that voluntary reporting needs to be underpinned by consistent and supportive registration and reporting frameworks by government itself.⁹

A COMMON REPORTING VENUE

GuideStar International (GSI) contends that publicly available information is crucial to ensure that the vital work of civil society sectors worldwide is known, enabled and effective. To that end, GSI supports the implementation of online reporting venues (‘GuideStars’) for a country’s CSOs¹⁰. Not only does this strategy promote values of transparency and accountability, it enables stakeholders (donors, policy makers, the media, the general public and, importantly, the CSOs themselves) to identify potential partners, grantees, experts and informants etc¹¹. If the Paris Declaration is to succeed in its aims of making aid more effective, it must take the opportunity of the HLF3 to extend the concept of ownership beyond narrow donor-government conceptions and to faithfully engage a wide array of stakeholders. As key constituents and experts, CSOs must be systematically included in these processes. As a starting point to take us from rhetoric to reality, governments, donors and CSOs alike must recognise that this cannot happen without publicly available, good quality, quantitative and qualitative information.

⁸ For a detailed analysis see Brown, D. L. and Jagadananda (2007). “Civil Society Legitimacy and Accountability: Issues and. Challenges” at http://www.civicus.org/new/media/LTA_ScopingPaper.pdf (accessed 1 August 2008)

⁹ “Opportunities and Limitations of Voluntary CSO Reporting”, July 2008, Marianna Török, Budapest, Hungary, <http://www.guidestarinternational.org/138/opportunities-and-limitations-of-voluntary-cso-reporting>

¹⁰ See www.guidestarinternational.org for more information on the GuideStar CSO information services.

¹¹ To be properly inclusive and comprehensive, a starting point is to obtain government CSO registers (and CSO reports where available) to provide a foundation for the database. The quality of these registers will vary (and so will access to them) but without this baseline data, any portal or database will be necessarily partial and exclusive. Each national service will also depend heavily upon CSOs providing valuable supplemental information and so is clearly an ambitious and challenging undertaking that requires sensitivity and collaboration.

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