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**THE FUTURE OF INDIA'S DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION: ENGAGING AND
PARTNERING WITH CIVIL SOCIETY OR NON-STATE ORGANISATIONS**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Considering the growing need and significance of development cooperation in India's foreign policy and international engagement, the Government of India needs to evolve strategies to enhance the reach and impact of its development assistance. The success of India's development cooperation initiatives and partnerships in the 21st century will depend on how effectively it can overcome the deficiencies and limitations of its present institutional structure at both the policy formulation and implementation stages. This policy brief argues that the time has come for India to create institutional space for the serious involvement of non-government stakeholders, especially Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the process of identification of development sectors, implementation of development initiatives and their evaluation. It first lays down the policy rationale for civil society participation, then looks at options to involve CSOs and NGOs and concludes by recommending how the expertise of CSOs and NGOs could be tapped in managing and evaluating development cooperation projects and partnerships.

Keywords: Development Cooperation, India, Civil Society

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POLICY QUESTIONS FOR INDIA'S DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

In the light of India's growing interest in strengthening South-South Cooperation (SSC), the following two policy issues with respect to its own approach to development cooperation require closer study and deeper analysis:

- Should India continue to engage only official agencies or government-to-government (G2G) channels throughout the conception, implementation and evaluation of its international development projects, particularly with partner countries in the South which do not have adequate institutional or official mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability and evaluate the impact of such projects?
- Is there an intention and capacity to create adequate and effective roles for non-state participants such as private enterprises, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) or Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and local communities in the entire policy process (from planning to formulation or design to implementation to evaluation and review)? If yes, then how can it be justified and operationalised?

BACKGROUND AND POLICY CONCERNS

India's approach to both development cooperation and SSC has been to support partner countries based on their needs in the short-term and the medium-term which is why it has been termed by several policy experts as “demand-driven”.¹ So far, right up to today, the five principles for peaceful co-existence enshrined in the *Panchsheel Agreement* signed between India and China in 1954 comprising of two main pillars - one, economic cooperation (focused on trade and investment flows including the removal of deficiencies in institutional and regulatory frameworks) and two, technical cooperation (focused on technology transfer and technical capacity building through training, exchange of experts and sharing of experience and knowhow) have shaped and guided almost all of India's decisions with respect to development partners and modalities.²

At present, India's development cooperation is carried out primarily as a government-to-government (G2G) process largely through the official development agency named Development Partnership Administration (DPA) division established in January 2012 under

¹ Chaturvedi, S. and Mohanty, SK. (March 2016) “Indian Development Cooperation: A Theoretical and Institutional Framework”. FIDC Policy Brief. No. 7. Available at: http://ris.org.in/pdf/fidc_policybrief7.pdf

² OECD's Report on “Trade-related South-South Cooperation : India”. Policy Dialogue on Aid for Trade. 2012. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/dac/aft/South-South_India.pdf

the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the MEA bureaucracy and other official channels³ However, in many OECD countries, non-state organizations that mobilise and pursue the shared interests of diverse groups of people in the public domain are defined as CSOs or NGOs⁴ play a significant and supportive role in the (international) development cooperation policy process.

Apart from official development assistance (ODA), their respective governments make strategic use of such local CSOs/NGOs for working with (including providing direct support to) CSOs/NGOs in partner countries as well as transnational CSOs/NGOs.⁵ The role of India's civil society is also evolving in this discourse. In fact, engagement of CSOs/NGOs in the field is now viewed as a voluntary partnership⁶ which has matured over the years and is ripe for action. As more and more CSOs / NGOs provide operational support at the grassroots levels, it is evident that such organisations are increasing their footprint in the development cooperation landscape.⁷ Several of them have also been sharing their expertise in diverse sectors including health, water, sanitation, energy, microfinance, capacity-building and so on.⁸

Further, in view of their increasing involvement in various aspects such as social audit, public scrutiny (using both mainstream as well as social media), participation in public debates, implementation at the ground-level etc. a key policy concern that emerges is whether India can learn to think and act beyond the conventional (read traditional) ways and means of conducting development cooperation efforts. In other words, as the Joint Secretary of the DPA in India acknowledged in 2013, “there is a pressing need for a dialogue between the DPA and Indian civil society on development cooperation policy and to seek options for engaging them in the implementation process and institutionalising it over time.”⁹

³ Samuel, J. and George A. (2016) “Future of Development Cooperation: Policy Priorities for an Emerging India”. ISDG and OXFAM India. Available: http://isdg.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/OXFAM-ISDG_PROJECT_22.07.2016.pdf

⁴ For a more detailed definition see “Working with Civil Society in Foreign Aid: Possibilities for South-South Cooperation?”. Annex 1. NGOs and CSOs: A Note on Terminology. pp. 123-125. Available: <http://www.cn.undp.org/content/dam/china/docs/Publications/UNDP-CH03%20Annexes.pdf>

For the purposes of this policy brief, the terms CSO and NGO are used interchangeably. Examples of CSOs/NGOs include community-based organizations, village associations, environmental groups, women’s rights groups, farmers’ associations, faith-based organizations, labour unions, co-operatives, professional associations, independent research institutes, not-for-profit civil rights groups etc.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ FIDC Policy Brief No. 5. (August 2015) “South-South Cooperation and India: Insights from FIDC Multi-stakeholder Policy Dialogues”. RIS. Available: http://ris.org.in/pdf/FIDC_policy_brief5.pdf

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ PRIA (2013). “India’s Global Development Presence and Engagement of Indian Civil Society”. *PRIA Workshop Report*. New Delhi: PRIA, Available: http://www.pria.org/docs/Indias_Global_Development_Presence_and_Engagement_of_Indian_Civil_Society.pdf

In the context of India's development cooperation, the relationship between civil society and the DPA can be classified depending on the level of collaboration of the CSO / NGO with the Government of India or the Ministry of External Affairs:

Type	Level of Engagement / Involvement	Organisations
I	High	FIDC, RIS, PRIA
II	Intermediate	CPR, SEWA, Utthan
III	Low	Centre for Civil Society (CCS)

Source: The structure of this table is based on the Classification of Forms of Legalization in International Law in Abbott K.W. et al. (2000), The Concept of Legalization, International Organization 54(3), pp. 401-419

The above classification is relevant in the light of the fact that civil society or the non-government sector is highly nebulous in the sense that there is hardly any one standard definition for them and given the limitations of using one yardstick to address the practicalities of civic engagement with State actors, it is important to focus our research and efforts on the *type* of civil society organisations that need to be engaged for Indian development cooperation and the *purpose* (in terms of the function) for which they are engaged.

Another concern pertains to the possible risks of India's development cooperation agenda becoming merely a tool for pursuing its commercial and strategic interests abroad. This may entail supporting 'rogue states', increasing the levels of indebtedness of the recipient countries, ignoring environmental protection norms, focusing largely on extracting resources, undermining the local institutions etc.,¹⁰ all of which are detrimental to India's longstanding principles of mutual benefit and support. In the absence of civil society, India's international development cooperation programme (especially projects undertaken by or jointly with private Indian enterprises) may have to face serious ethical and moral questions regarding its continuation.

LOOKING AHEAD: OPTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The first policy option is to include non-state organisations like CSOs or NGOs in development cooperation because it is likely to strengthen existing capacity, individual and state capabilities and the overall development potential at the grassroots level.¹¹ India has a wide range of CSOs/NGOs with experience and expertise in the field of international

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

development partnership including poverty reduction, women's empowerment, social welfare and community development.¹² The MEA along with research think-tanks and policymakers should facilitate regular interaction and exchange of knowledge among various stakeholders including policy experts, members of parliament, CSOs/NGOs, academia and the media.¹³

Second, Indian CSOs or NGOs which are active in the developing countries to which India provides development assistance need to be given greater opportunities for participating not only in public dialogues and discussions regarding India's development cooperation, but also in the implementation of projects in partner countries. This will ensure greater transparency, accountability and democratic participation.¹⁴ For instance, data and inputs/feedback collected from and/or shared by them could be used to improve future policy formulation and project implementation. As India already has a well-established tradition and track record of indigenous voluntary organisations involved in sustainable development and a whole range of CSOs/NGOs with credibility, capacity and international experience, there is great opportunity for the government (specifically MEA) to request Indian CSOs/NGOs to make direct development interventions in the development cooperation projects in partner countries.¹⁵ Such organisations have the potential to improve not only the impact of partnerships but also the accountability of the government. This is by no means to disregard the arguments and the cases on the inefficiencies and corruption that exist among CSOs or NGOs¹⁶ but instead to focus on making a case for their active participation while recognising their limitations.

Third, government-to-government (G2G) partnerships without (adequate) public scrutiny carry an inherent risk for corruption. This is why the presence of CSOs/NGOs would be vital to increase transparency and overall accountability and thereby prevent corruption. In fact, along with official agencies, India could encourage the direct involvement of CSOs/NGOs based in India in partnership with the CSOs/NGOs of the recipient-partner country in the implementation of projects. This approach can significantly boost the outcome(s) and impact of India's development cooperation.

Finally, we need to bear in mind that several of India's recipient partners have weak democratic institutions and hence hardly any checks and balances. It is therefore, imperative for India to not only provide them with development cooperation but also utilise the collective experience of its own CSOs/NGOs in advocacy to safeguard and strengthen

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ For instance, multi-stakeholder roundtables or policy dialogues, public discussions etc.

¹⁴ Samuel, J. and George A. (2016) "Future of Development Cooperation: Policy Priorities for an Emerging India". ISDG and OXFAM India.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See generally, Aubrey L. (1997) *The Politics of Development Cooperation: NGOs, Gender and Partnership in Kenya*. London ; New York : Routledge; Rana PK. (2016) "Civil society organizations and its Limitation". International Journal of Law. Volume 2. Issue 6. November 2016. pp. 82-84.

institutional delivery mechanisms.

In summary, within the Government of India as well as South-South Cooperation (SSC), the role of civil society partnership in conceiving and implementing development cooperation policy is recognised as a crucial requirement towards the achievement of the principles of mutual benefit and mutual respect that are the conceptual pillars of the SSC framework.¹⁷ India has already institutionalized the coordination of its development cooperation activities by establishing the DPA and then setting up Forum for Indian Development Cooperation (FIDC) as a platform for facilitating regular interaction between the MEA and civil society members. However, a lot of further research is required (based on fieldwork-based evidence) on (a) how to select CSOs/NGOs and also (b) the operationalising framework for their sustained participation in the delivery and feedback evaluation of development projects in their specific sectors of expertise.

CONCLUSION

In order to play a key role in international development cooperation, particularly in South-South Cooperation, India needs to reimagine its policy with respect to implementation of development assistance projects in order to make its partnerships with recipients more effective. A larger role for civil society organisations (CSOs) or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) coupled with the creation of more opportunities for public discussion and participation can ensure more transparency, more accountability, better availability of (disaggregated) data, better evaluation of process and outcomes, last-mile linkage with stakeholders, more optimum use of resources and therefore, greater success of India's development cooperation initiatives. In this way, by first improving project implementation at the grassroots level and then policy evaluation, India can assume a larger and more positive stakeholder role in enabling the partner countries to achieve their Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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¹⁷ United Nations (2012), *High-level Committee on S-S Cooperation. Framework of operational guidelines on UN support to South-South and triangular cooperation*, SSC/17/3, New York, p. 7.

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