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CSOs in Indian Development Cooperation: Towards an Enabling Environment

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Abstract

This chapter argues that the capacities Indian CSOs have acquired in other developing countries could create a wider impact for India's official aid, if the government became more willing to incorporate such expertise. The chapter first briefly introduces India's cooperation modalities within the broad tradition of South-South cooperation (SSC), before discussing contributions made by Indian CSOs nationally and internationally. It provides some concrete examples of cooperation between these CSOs and stakeholders in other developing countries, particularly in Asia and Africa. It draws some critical lessons from these examples as they pertain to SSC principles and practice. The author next highlights challenges that Indian CSOs face in practicing SSC, particularly the constraints imposed by the current legal and regulatory environment within India. The author then discusses recent CSO advocacy efforts, including their engagement in the multilateral processes set up by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS). The final section offers some concrete suggestions for creating an enabling environment for Indian CSOs in order to make India's development cooperation more open and inclusive.

1. Introduction

Indian civil society organizations (CSOs) have played myriad roles in the country's development. The contributions of CSOs in elementary education, primary health care, natural resource and environmental conservation, local governance, and many other fields have received considerable government recognition (Planning Commission of India, 2007). Many innovations and inclusive practices, the outgrowths of experimentation in the Indian context, have not only expanded across the nation but come into use in other developing countries. The Indian government's current official development cooperation, however, does not adequately recognize and engage CSOs (Mawdsley and Roychoudhury, 2016).

This chapter argues that over the decades, many Indian CSOs have acquired considerable capacities and outreach scope in other developing regions — particularly in parts of Asia and Africa — and if the Indian state would include and apply such expertise, its development cooperation could see far greater impact. The first section in this chapter briefly introduces India's cooperation modalities within the broad tradition of South-South cooperation (SSC). The second section presents an account of contributions by Indian CSOs, nationally and internationally. It provides some concrete examples of cooperation between these CSOs and development actors in other developing countries, particularly in Asia and Africa. It draws some critical lessons from these examples with relevance for the principles and practices of SSC. The third section highlights challenges that Indian CSOs face in participating in and practicing SSC. The fourth section illustrates recent advocacy efforts by Indian CSOs, including their engagement in the processes set up by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS).¹ The final section offers some concrete suggestions for creating an enabling environment for Indian CSOs in order to make India's development cooperation and SSC more open and inclusive.

¹ The BRICS acronym stands for an association of five nations – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. Originally coined by Jim O'Neil of Goldman Sachs, the term initially grouped the first four countries as BRIC, adding South Africa in 2010. Since 2009, seven BRICS Summits have taken place. This group of five nations has launched the New Development Bank which became functional since 2014, after the Sixth BRICS Summit in Fortaleza, Brazil.

2. India's Development Cooperation

The history of Indian development cooperation dates back to the country's independence. In fact, the first instance even goes back to the pre-independence interim government formed in 1946 (FIDC, 2016). In recent decades, India's cooperation with other developing countries has grown significantly, adding more countries and more modalities to its portfolio. Although it is itself a developing nation with large numbers of poor people, India has shared its knowledge, experience, technology, and resources with peer nations in similar situations. A sense of solidarity, empathy, ideology, and pragmatism around international politics and diplomacy has guided this sharing. The emergence of a new confidence, inspired by consistent economic growth and accompanied by growing global aspiration, has spurred India to redefine and reinforce its development cooperation. The global development community expects an enhanced contribution from India, especially within the framework of the United Nations Global Compact and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

According to Chaturvedi (2015), India's development assistance programme has the twin objectives of mitigating poverty and revitalizing economic growth in partner countries, and currently works through five implementation channels: capacity-building and skills transfer, technical cooperation, grants, development finance (including concessional loans and lines of credit), and trade and investment (which also include credit lines). This broad portfolio of modalities allows for flexibility that makes it attractive for partner countries in the Global South.

In recent years, the volume and diversity of Indian assistance, under the broad rubric of SSC, has grown exponentially. According to one estimate, India's development assistance programme grew more than twelve-fold between 2001 and 2014 (from INR 11.86 billion to INR 147.59 billion). As of 2014-2015, Indian assistance through grants and loans came to USD 1.4 billion (Mullen, 2014).

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) set up the Development Partnership Administration (DPA) in January 2012 in order to coordinate the growing number of instruments and higher resource volumes deployed in Indian cooperation. The DPA aims to streamline and improve delivery of these varied elements through the stages of project conceptualization, launch, implementation, and commissioning through Indian agencies.

India's current cooperation practices still take their guidelines from the framework and principles of SSC, but they have not exploited the potential soft power² and density of relationships that CSOs can bring to this compact. SSC

² The term "soft power" was first used by the American academic Joseph Nye (1990) to describe the ability to attract and co-opting rather than coercing, using force, or giving money as a means of persuasion. India has a great repository of such non-coercive soft-power resources: its spiritualism, yoga, cuisine, movies, television soap operas, and classical or popular dance and music have fascinated people and societies across the world. The knowledge, skill, and wisdom residing in the numerous Indian diaspora across the world also supply a vast source of soft power. This repository also includes the knowledge, skills, affordable technology, and participatory methods created through Indian CSO innovation.

conceptually acknowledges and envisages the role of people-to-people contacts in extending solidarity between developing societies. However, Indian development cooperation modalities and their deployment — largely government-to-government and business-to-business — do not optimize soft power, which substantially resides outside the state. This state-centricity in SSC practice makes it truncated and inadequate, as it does not tap into the energy, talent, knowledge, expertise and network of relations available with Indian CSOs. We will argue that Indian CSOs could enhance the effectiveness of Indian development cooperation and India's soft power through people-centric development interventions such as training, capacity building, networking, advocacy, and knowledge production in the form of actionable research.

3. Development Cooperation Experience of Indian CSOs

Indian CSOs have a long history. Apart from their broad presence throughout the country, they are diverse and vibrant (PRIA, 2000, 2001; Tandon, 2002). After the Emergency³ (1972-1975), India witnessed a phenomenal growth in domestic CSOs, which contributed significantly to the creation of more inclusive and effective social policies. CSOs in India have traditionally worked in social and economic policy areas such as primary education, primary health care, housing, microfinance, sustainable agriculture, and governance, through a combination of innovation, empowerment, and advocacy. Their development interventions focus on citizens, crucially women, tribals, dalits, minorities, and other marginalized groups (Mahajan, 2002; Behar and Prakash, 2004).

In order to capture the diversity in Indian CSOs, Tandon and Mohanty (2002) presented a classification based on types of citizen association. They defined the meaning of civil society as “collective initiatives for common public good” and classified Indian CSOs into four “types” of associations — traditional and religious associations, social movements, membership groups, and intermediary associations. It is the last-named that interest us chiefly in the context of CSO-driven SSC.

Drawing on their practices in India, many Indian CSOs have extended solidarity and support to other developing countries, providing knowledge, technology, and skills support to promote sustainable and inclusive development; their partners include local communities, CSOs, and sub-national and national governments. The methodologies

developed under similar contexts of poverty, exclusion, and inequality have, with local adaptations, proven relevant in other developing countries. Barring a handful of cases, these initiatives have drawn their support and financing chiefly from international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from developing countries,

³ The President of India declared a state of emergency on June 25, 1975 through an ordinance. The Indian government suspended all fundamental rights, arrested a number of politicians, and imposed censorship on the media for 19 months (June 1975-March 1977). Shri Jai Prakash Narayan, a political activist and social reformer, called for comprehensive political, social and economic reforms known as “Total Revolution”. He inspired hundreds of youths to join the movement. Many of these young people later continued their engagement and provided leadership to various social movements through voluntary organisations.

along with bilateral donors from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, the United Nations (UN), and other multilateral agencies. The next section presents four cases of long-standing Indian CSOs that have scaled up their interventions in countries across Africa and Southeast Asia. These cases provide valuable lessons in the soft-power potential of participatory, citizen-centred approaches and how this can enhance SSC.

Case 1: Development Alternatives (DA), an Indian CSO, was established in 1983 with a mission to help eliminate poverty and regenerate the environmental resource base through scalable methods. Its approach to innovation, implementation, and influence helps create models that generate both sustainable livelihoods and impacts on a large scale. DA develops eco-solutions and works with partners (government agencies, local entrepreneurs and civil society) to market these solutions in a commercially viable and an environmentally-friendly manner to an ever-growing body of consumers. DA has pioneered several eco-friendly, resource-efficient building material technologies and production systems that can contribute to sustainable infrastructure development and job creation. These include clean technologies in brickmaking, technologies that reduce the use of virgin resources and replace them with industrial wastes, and carbon-saving and waste-recycling innovations. DA methods adapt especially well in the micro-, small and medium-sized enterprise (MSME) sector, in India and globally.

Between 1995 and 2001, DA created brick-production technologies and systems, low-emission building materials, and industrial waste utilization in India with support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). These building products and related services have reached over one million customers in India who have built new homes and upgraded existing houses and service establishments.

Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh and one of its most populous, has seen rapid growth in demand for construction bricks, whose production tends to increase greenhouse gas emissions. In 2009, a consortium led by DA (including Skat Consulting, Switzerland and Practical Action, Bangladesh) introduced the Vertical Shaft Brick Kiln (VSBK) as a demonstration package for Bangladesh entrepreneurs, aiming to create awareness of alternate means of reducing air pollution (Prajapati and Maity, 2010). The pilot demonstration of the VSBK technology created substantial interest among all major stakeholders in the Bangladesh brick industry. The Bangladesh Ministry of Environment and Forests took a keen interest in it as a replacement for the existing energy- and resource-intensive fixed chimney kilns. Apart from reduced emissions, the technology also increased profitability 20 percent because of reduced coal and labor usage. Entrepreneurs and regulatory agencies both expressed interest in adopting the VSBK system, on the score of enhanced profits as well as compliance with environmental standards (Darain *et al.*, 2013).

The intervention by DA engaged local communities, CSOs, private entrepreneurs, government authorities, and international donors in promoting VSBK as an energy-efficient technology for greening the Bangladesh brick industry. This collaboration institutionalized learning and behaviour changes

within an ecosystem that supported the brick industry (Kumar, 2016).

Case 2: CUTS International (Consumer Unity and Trust Society International), an Indian CSO established in 1983, has evolved into a respected organization promoting consumer rights. Its Indian interventions received an impetus from a 1984 amendment to the 1969 Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Act (MRTPA) that brought unfair trade practices within the purview of the MRTPA (CUTS International, 2014). Its work with the Competition Commission of India led CUTS to believe that competition would encourage enterprises to strive for efficiency and innovation, ultimately leading to more diverse and/or higher-quality products and services at lower prices. CUTS also works on the assumption that competition among enterprises should remain just and fair. However, many developing countries in the

Global South worry that such competitive regimes run the risk of exposing domestic enterprises to global competition. They may have either no consumer protection laws or inadequate ones; they often also have weak capacities for drafting laws in the best interest of their economies, ones that can protect the poorest sections of their populations and yet remain compatible with international frameworks such as those established under the World Trade Organization (Mehta and Sengupta, 2012).

Having worked in India for several decades, CUTS International has developed enormous on-the-ground experience rooted in the Southern context. Since 2000, with support from the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) and other donors, CUTS has provided its knowledge and capacity-building in competition reform and consumer empowerment to over 30 Asian and sub-Saharan African countries, engaging many state and non-state actors. In each country, CUTS facilitates an initial assessment to understand the existing barriers, as well as ways to evolve national competition regimes. The team next implements a well-defined capacity-development strategy for national stakeholders, including policy-makers, regulators, CSOs (particularly consumer groups), academics, and media figures, to help them understand and appreciate competition concerns from national, regional and international perspectives.

CUTS provides inputs into both the drafting of new competition legislation and reforming of existing laws, for example in Botswana, Kenya, Mauritius, Vietnam and Zambia (Sengupta and Sharma, 2016). It contextualizes and adapts best practices for each specific country context, in areas from public procurement and negotiations to participation in economic diplomacy, in order to influence outcomes of future policies on global trade, technology and investment; it also promotes understanding of the trade rules that apply to intellectual property rights (Mehta and Sengupta, 2012). In order to develop local ownership, CUTS creates a small group of key stakeholders and opinion leaders – referred to as the National Reference Group (NRG) – in each country. The groups have become the local champions of promoting and strengthening competition regimes and agencies, considered as both the guide and the ambassador of such projects in each country (Sengupta and Sharma, 2016). Comprised of diverse stakeholders

at the country level, the NRGs play a key role in identifying research gaps and capacity-building needs, reviewing project studies, organizing training programmes, and contributing to advocacy campaigns to promote policy change.

Case 3: The Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), an Indian CSO, was established in 1982. It works to strengthen citizen participation in aid and enhance transparency and accountability in local governance. PRIA also supports marginalized communities in realizing their rights and entitlements, and helps local governance institutions develop capacities that respond to the needs of these communities. Analysis of governance deficits in Indian, Bangladeshi and Cambodian municipalities shaped its Deepening Local Democratic Governance through Social Accountability in Asia project, supported by the UN Democracy Fund. PRIA implemented this project with two CSO partners – PRIP Trust in Bangladesh and SILAKA in Cambodia. PRIA's decades-long programmatic partnership with these CSOs helped them build a strong consortium. Implemented between 2011 and 2013, the project chiefly aimed to promote social accountability mechanisms in municipalities (PRIA, 2013).

PRIA helped develop capacities for local communities, urban local bodies, CSOs, media and utility companies, and national ministries, improving public service delivery by promoting participation and accountability at the local governance level. The CSO used a combination of strategies such as citizen mobilization, campaigns, capacity-building, and participatory monitoring (PRIA, SILAKA and PRIP Trust, 2013). Citizen mobilization contributed to the formation of neighbourhood committees, which provided an effective space for citizen engagement. Capacity-building helped municipal councillors and officials become aware of the importance of a transparent and accountable municipal governance system. In partnership with these municipalities, PRIA helped create models for social-accountability mechanisms — such as citizen charters, proactive information disclosure, and grievance redressal — to enhance citizen access to information and basic services. The consortium also developed

partnerships with local CSOs and facilitated training sessions, exposure visits, and on-site troubleshooting support to help the CSOs acquire new knowledge about urban governance and social accountability. The study visits to India helped them understand how they might work with municipalities on social accountability and governance in urban areas (UNDEF 2014).

Case 4: Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), an Indian CSO, was established in 1972. It is one of the largest organizations of poor, self-employed and informal-sector women workers in India. SEWA initially worked with street-vendors; it realized that there were many similarities between the issues facing informal-sector women workers in India and in various African countries. It has built close associations with unions in South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria to promote the rights and well-being of informal workers, especially women. SEWA leaders have exchanged several visits with their African counterparts to learn from each other and support collective action (SEWA, n.d.; Indian Express, 2016).

These interactions with African trade union leaders indicated the local

relevance and utility of SEWA's integrated approach, especially for women workers. SEWA joined with the Self-Employed Women's Union (SEWU) and South African SEWA (SASEWA) in South Africa; the Organisation for Women in Self-Employment (WISE) in Ethiopia; the Conservation, Hotel, Domestic and Allied Workers Union (CHODAWU) in Tanzania; and the Trade Union Congress (Ghana) in Ghana. Together, they conceptualized a project intervention called SETU Africa.

The Indian MEA requested that SEWA design, develop and monitor a project to strengthen popular organizations in five African countries – South Africa, Ethiopia, Ghana, Tanzania and Senegal – over 36 months beginning in November 2012. The project sought to empower informal women workers through an integrated approach led by the women themselves. The result, VimoSEWA, is an insurance program aimed at providing social protections for SEWA members to cover their life-cycle needs and the various risks they face in their lives. Crises such as illness, widowhood, accident, fire, communal riots, floods and other such natural and man-made calamities result in the loss of work, income, and assets for poor working families. Through this insurance organization, in which they act as users, owners and managers of all services, SEWA members receive coverage for death, asset loss, widowhood, personal accident, sickness, and maternity, as well as medical insurance for themselves and their families.

SEWA collaborated with local organizations in South Africa, Ethiopia, Ghana, Tanzania and Senegal to assess the needs and priorities of their populations, determining what existed and what additional inputs were required. In the first year, SEWA organized needs- assessment workshops in South Africa, Ethiopia and Tanzania and conducted assessment studies in all five African countries. After this phase, SEWA and its respective partners undertook the following interventions in each country: *microfinance* activities that promoted self-help groups providing integrated financial services (savings, credit, insurance and pension), along with capacity-building and financial literacy; *microenterprise and livelihood promotion* that examined local feasibilities, markets, etc., and then helped organizations set up their own viable micro-enterprises; plans for extending *micro-insurance* to local communities, especially women, along with capacity-building to help local organizations implement this; *health and child care* systems development (tailored to local conditions and needs) targeting women and children, including basic primary health care, health education, and life-saving information; and *organizing women into unions and cooperatives and strengthening their existing leadership*, building capacities in cooperative and activity management and helping women lead their own organizations (Chatterjee, 2015).

The SETU Africa Programme illustrates how an Indian CSO has responded to the pressing needs of the poor and marginalized in five African countries by using an integrated approach to poverty reduction and self-reliance for women and their families.

(1) Lessons Learned by Indian CSOs in Promoting SSC

These four cases provide some critical lessons about Indian CSO strategies that aid SSC, and how projects conceptualized in India could transfer to other countries and promote partnerships with their governments. All the Indian CSOs described here respond to the needs and concerns of citizens, especially those from the marginalized sections of society who lack voices and bargaining power. This focus on the marginalized has pressing importance for many African, Southeast Asian and Latin American governments concerned with extending the benefits of development to all their citizens. Before Indian CSOs begin project implementation in other countries, innovations first undergo a pilot stage and assessment in India; the lessons derived then become part of the project design and knowledge shared with partner countries. Most of the projects discussed here made efforts to deepen local ownership and mutual trust while holding each partner accountable for expected changes from the conceptualization stage. Before implementation, each CSO analysed the design of appropriate interventions for each situation with the involvement of local actors. Such an approach enhances the likelihood of success in other contexts. The capacity-building expertise of Indian CSOs is crucial for creating sustainable interventions in other Southern countries. All the examples created a favourable institutional ecosystem in which multiple stakeholders developed new knowledge, capacities, and practices to effect positive change. This process of acquiring new knowledge and practices should involve all concerned stakeholders; engaging one stakeholder alone rarely proves effective.

(2) Challenges Faced by Indian CSOs in Promoting SSC

Despite the impressive diversity of experience evidenced in the previous section, Indian CSOs face formidable challenges in institutionalizing their participation in official development cooperation. In the past, both cooperation and confrontation have characterized their engagements in domestic development policy issues, which necessarily played out within a democratic framework and competitive politics. CSO expertise and information have benefitted many public policies and their implementation. However, over the years, challenges have emerged in the legal and political environment in which Indian CSOs operate and engage with contemporary issues, both nationally and internationally (VANI, 2014).

Most Indian laws relevant to CSOs are meant to regulate their inflow of resources, particularly from foreign sources. The current set of laws -such as the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), the Income Tax Act, the Societies Registration Act, and other acts — pose significant legal hurdles for the work of Indian CSOs in other developing countries.

- Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA): This is the most common topic in discussions about the regulatory framework of CSOs in India. Begun in 1976 as an ordinance during the Emergency, the FCRA has not only survived successive governments, but has also become increasingly restrictive (PRIA,

2001). Recently, some high-profile cases have occurred in which the Indian government investigated and canceled foreign donation receipts for certain nonprofits (Greenpeace India, the Sabrang Trust, and the Lawyers Collective have grabbed the most attention). However, the larger global and national context since 9/11 and the subsequent “war on terror” have resulted in much closer scrutiny for receipt and utilization of foreign contributions in India as well. The most critical 2010 FCRA amendment made renewal of CSO registration mandatory every five years. The first round of registration renewals took place over the last year, and several CSOs failed to obtain renewals. This has raised fears amongst CSOs about receiving foreign donations in the future. A somewhat problematic aspect of the FCRA has always been the interpretation of its sweeping phrases, such as “national interest” and “activities of a political nature”. The regulatory authorities have now begun to define such terms more closely and enforce them more strictly. The current rules allow FCRA-registered organizations to receive foreign funds only for use in India, and do not allow transfer of these funds outside the country.

- Laws related to legal incorporation: CSOs in India have one of the following options⁴ for legal incorporation: Society (under the Society Registration Act 1860), Trust (under the Public Trust Act 1882), and Nonprofit Company (under Section 8 of the Indian Companies Act 2013). “Society” is the most common form of registration used by Indian. The Society Registration Act is simple to use, and its overall provisions provide for significant autonomy in CSO activities. However, some of the state-specific Society Registration Acts limit the operation of a CSO outside the state territory, let alone permitting it to operate internationally.
- Income Tax Act 1961: CSOs in India are considered nonprofit entities only if they receive an annual “certification” as such from the income tax authorities. A small category of nonprofit organizations are *suo moto* tax-exempt, but all other entities, irrespective of their incorporation as Society, Trust, or Company, must register with the income tax authorities under Section 12A. In the past decade, the compliance mechanisms for the different Income Tax Act provisions have become increasingly strict and time-consuming. A CSO’s objectives and activities, as specified in its Memorandum of Association (and Charter), require verification by the income tax authorities in light of the Section 2(15) definition of Charity. Moreover, the Act only allows disbursement of funds within India; any expenses disbursed outside India will lead to loss of Section 12A tax-exempt status.

Over the last decade, a perception has grown among many Indian CSOs that the government has gradually tightened the regulatory environment in which

⁴ The two other options for legal incorporation include Trade Union Act 1961 and Cooperatives (both sectoral and multi-purpose) Act 2008. Some NGOs are registered as Trade Unions. The most notable example is the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA). A large number of farmers’ organisations, fishers’ associations, and self-help groups are registered as Cooperatives.

they operate (VANI, 2014). This perception was bolstered with the November 2016 cancellation of 11,000 organizations (in addition to the 10,000 FCRA registrations cancelled in 2015), reducing the number of CSOs permitted to receive foreign funding to 20,500 — fewer than half of the 42,500 registered under the FCRA in 2010 (Tikku, 2016).

Most innovations by Indian CSOs have received financial support from external donors, including bilateral and multilateral agencies, international NGOs, and foundations. In the past decade, funding to Indian CSOs from these sources has dropped substantially. Since the OECD Donor Assistance Committee recategorized India as a “lower middle-income country,” a large number of bilateral donors and their recipient international NGOs have either withdrawn or declined to send aid resources to India. Indian CSOs that traditionally received funding from these sources now face a scenario of declining resources (VANI, n.d.). Moreover, despite growing investment in SSC by successive Indian governments, hardly any funding support has become available for CSO-led initiatives. There could be two possible reasons for this. First, the Indian government mostly uses financial instruments, such as lines of credit and concessional loans, to fund infrastructure development in partner countries. Such forms of cooperation leave very little scope for CSO engagement. Small development projects that focus on communities and leave room for CSO involvement seem to have received low priority in both India and partner countries. For example, Bangladesh and India signed a memorandum of understanding for small development projects in April 2013, but the projects have yet to see implementation on the ground. Second, management of the entire project cycle — appraisal, planning, implementation, monitoring, and impact assessment — is relatively closed, and relevant information does not necessarily appear in the public domain. This makes it rather difficult for Indian CSOs to engage with such projects. Publicly- available information helps CSOs learn the rules of the game and proactively offer relevant expertise that facilitates project objectives. CSOs that advocate for improving the governance and modalities of Indian development cooperation require this kind of information in order to engage constructively.

Many transnational interventions require community representatives, CSOs, and officials from other countries to travel to India for training sessions, workshops, conferences, dialogues, exposure visits, and other capacity-building events organized in the country. Most Indian CSOs find it difficult to arrange for attendees’ visas in time. Since exposure to Indian experience plays a critical role in many such interventions, this difficulty adds to the anxiety that CSOs face. Ironically, arranging visas for South Asian delegates proves even more difficult, given the inconsistent diplomatic relationships between India and its South-Asian neighbors. In addition, many Indian CSOs also face challenges in arranging short-term visas for their staff for travel to other countries. Overcoming this challenge depends to a large extent on the relationship between the local CSO affiliate and the partner government.

(3) Advocacy strategies for Institutionalizing CSO Engagement

The practices of development cooperation by the Indian government and Indian CSOs have yet to converge. While both sets of practices have followed SSC principles, their instruments, modalities, and financing have remained independent of each other. Moreover, the interpretation and translation of these principles have also differed somewhat in practice, but have potential for complementarities. In recent years, Indian CSOs have proactively sought constructive engagement with the MEA particularly with the DPA.

The analysis that follows would suggest that Indian CSOs currently pursue a combination of strategies to advocate for greater engagement in India's development cooperation. These efforts have taken place both in the sphere of bilateral cooperation and through multilateral entities such as BRICS fora (see below).

The engagement between CSOs and government in India received significant impetus with the launch of the Forum for Indian Development Cooperation (FIDC) in January 2013. FIDC has evolved as a multi-stakeholder forum with representatives from CSOs, academia, think tanks, and the DPA. The Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) – an independent think tank, linked to the MEA – currently acts as its Secretariat. FIDC aims to analyse trends in SSC and contextualize Indian policies by facilitating discussions across various sectors and stakeholders. It works towards raising awareness about development cooperation policies through seminars, discussion meetings, and publications (FIDC, 2017).

CSOs in India have understandably concerned themselves with issues related to domestic poverty, exclusion, and inequality. The enormity of these issues has warranted interventions from CSOs, and they have prioritized effective domestic solutions before attending to similar issues in other developing countries. This has required engagement with those ministries and institutions chiefly responsible for national and sub-national development policies. This left a vacuum in CSO engagement with the MEA, the body primarily responsible for conceptualizing and managing India's development cooperation in accordance with foreign policy. That said, Indian CSOs have proved both vigilant about and cooperative with the government's engagement with other multilateral and global governance institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, The World Bank, Asian Development Bank, United Nations, and so on (PRIA, 1989; Carolyn, 2001; Martin and Tandon, 2014).

However, given this historical lack of CSO engagement in foreign policy issues and the divide between the development and the diplomatic communities, it became necessary for the FIDC to reach out to Indian CSOs. From 2013 onward, FIDC and its members organized a series of dialogues involving Indian CSOs and MEA officials. On the one hand, these enhanced MEA understanding and appreciation of Indian CSOs in development cooperation; on the other, they advocated with MEA officials for the value added through CSO engagement. In addition, the discussion papers, policy briefs, newsletters, and other knowledge

resources produced and disseminated by FIDC and its various members augmented this outreach effort.

Over the last few years, FIDC has made significant efforts to bridge the gap between Indian CSOs and the government. In one notable instance, it organized a joint workshop as a side event of the UN Third International Conference on Financing for Development (Addis Ababa, July 2015) — perhaps the first-ever global event outside India jointly organized by CSOs and the government. On many issues, such as transfer of technology (particularly as related to climate change mitigation and adaptation), mobilization of domestic resources, and control of illicit financial flows, the Indian CSOs and government took a shared position. This not only helped in official negotiations between governments, but also in building civil society solidarity across developing countries.

These advocacy efforts also received significant encouragement with the India-Africa Framework for Strategic Cooperation document, a product of the Third India-Africa Forum Summit (held in October 2015 in New Delhi) that referenced the role of civil society in development cooperation. The framework agreement made a commitment to “[e]ncourage use of modern social networks to build communities of mutual interest. Linkages between academia, journalists, media entities and civil society will be further encouraged *inter alia* through the FIDC to document successful development interventions by civil society among communities in developing countries” (MEA, 2015).

These dialogues indicated that although many CSOs had programmes in developing countries, very few studies existed analysing these experiences from a SSC perspective. The research report on *Engaging Civil Society in India’s Development Cooperation: A Compilation of Case Studies*, spearheaded by the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) in partnership with other prominent Indian CSOs⁵ (PRIA, 2015), filled this knowledge gap to some extent. The FIDC also brought out a directory of Indian NGOs engaged in SSC projects and programmes (FIDC and RIS, 2013).

(4) Indian CSO Efforts to Make the BRICS Inclusive

The emergence of the BRICS, and India’s involvement in it, caught the imagination and attention of Indian CSOs, especially during the Fourth BRICS Summit hosted by India in March 2012. A small group of Indian CSOs met in a PRIA-organized workshop a week before the official summit. The memorandum they produced (PRIA, 2012) called for greater attention to those trade and economic policies in BRICS countries that perpetuate and exacerbate inequality and exclusion. It urged the Prime Minister of India, as host of the summit, to take the lead in evolving an institutional means for continuing dialogue among CSOs in all five BRICS countries, the better to harness their practical knowledge in

⁵ The documentation included case studies of Development Alternatives Group, Basix, CUTS International, Society for Participatory Research in Asia, VimoSEWA, KABIL, Shack/Slum Dwellers International, Centre for Science and Environment, and Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability.

addressing the challenges of increasing inequality and exclusion.

However, we should note that although a separate BRICS Academic Forum took place concurrently, the official New Delhi Summit did not recognize any engagement with civil society. The next year, when South Africa hosted the Fifth BRICS Summit, CSOs from all five BRICS countries, including India, continued their efforts to engage from outside channels. Two sets of unofficial CSO events marked the fifth summit. The “Rising Powers in International Development Programme” of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) based in the United Kingdom organized one cluster, involving civil society, academic institutions, and think tanks from the BRICS countries. An initiative called “BRICS from Below” organized the other event in Durban, presented as a “counter- summit.” This initiative, since renamed “BRICS from Below, Middle, and Above”, emerged as a network of activists and scholars from the BRICS countries, including India; it continues to engage critically from an anti-capitalist viewpoint (People’s Forum on BRICS, 2017).

The Sixth BRICS Summit in Fortaleza, Brazil saw no major breakthrough vis-à-vis civil society engagement. A major departure, however, came in the Seventh BRICS Summit under Russia’s presidency; the country not only hosted the first-ever Civil BRICS Forum prior to the official Seventh Summit, but also recognized the contribution of the Civil BRICS Forum in the official post-summit declaration.

Indian CSOs picked up the thread from the precedent set by the Russians. Prior to the Eighth BRICS Summit in Goa (India), the FIDC organized a meeting of the Civil BRICS Forum in New Delhi in October 2016. The forum deliberated at length on effective implementation of the SDGs and the need for robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks, as well as follow-up and review. It called for deepened and widened SSC in aid of achieving these global goals. The Civil BRICS

Forum also addressed issues such as global governance and development finance, inclusive multilateralism, quality of economic growth, health and malnutrition, youth livelihoods, skills and education, human security, peace and justice, sustainable urbanization, climate change, and vulnerability. Forum participants strongly advocated for mechanisms to institutionalize civil society engagement.

In the run-up to the Civil BRICS Forum, CSOs held a number of consultations in various Indian states. Wada Na Todo Abhiyan (WNTA), the People’s Budget Initiative (PBI), and Oxfam India, along with CSO partners from the BRICS and other developing countries, met with various stakeholders, including academics, CSOs, social movement adherents, and policy experts from the BRICS nations. These meetings culminated in two sub-national consultations held in Goa and Ranchi in India in July 2016, ahead of an international consultation on the “BRICS and the Agenda of Equality and Social Change” in New Delhi on 28-29 July, 2016. Voluntary Action Network India (VANI), a national platform of Indian CSOs and one of the founding members of FIDC, organized a two-day

international prelude meeting to the Civil BRICS Forum in New Delhi. This meeting aimed to discuss two pressing issues: means of enhancing CSO effectiveness in the current challenging environment (regulatory reforms, shrinking resources, and CSO needs for capacity-building), and potential resource exchange among the BRICS countries.

Continuing with the tradition set by the 2013 Durban “BRICS from Below” initiative, the People’s Forum on BRICS took place in Goa immediately before the official summit. It involved a range of trade unions, social movements, academics, and CSOs from various BRICS countries; as described by the organizers, the meeting aimed to share analyses and build solidarity in the resistance against neo-liberalism and corporate globalization. The forum unequivocally called for the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB) to support transparent, participative, and accountable development that would be socially and environmentally sustainable and meet the needs of the poorest and most marginalized communities. It also urged the BRICS countries to promote an enabling environment for civil society to partner and contribute in the design, implementation, and monitoring of SDG efforts. Apart from organizing these consultations over the last three years, Indian CSOs have also made contributions toward filling their knowledge gaps and have articulated their positions and policy asks through several policy-oriented research studies. Two seminal publications, *Engaging BRICS: Challenges and Opportunities for Civil Society*, published by Oxfam India (2012) and *Civil Society – BRICS Engagement: Opportunities and Challenges*, published by PRIA and FIM (2013), both advocated for civil society’s strategic and constructive engagement with BRICS governments. Both also unequivocally argued that greater engagement of civil society would not only ensure the transparency, accountability and global responsiveness of BRICS policymaking, but also provide effective challenge the existing hegemonic functioning of other global governance institutions.

A majority of Indian CSOs understandably focus on domestic governance, democracy, and development issues, and only a few of them appreciate the rationale for India’s development cooperation. Several leading CSOs, such as those mentioned above (PRIA, VANI, Wada Na Todo Abhiyan, Oxfam India) and the National Foundation of India have adopted a strategy of informing and mobilising the broader civil society constituency (other CSOs, academia, think tanks, and media) about India’s global footprint. For example, as one of the founding members of FIDC, PRIA has organized several consultations with these constituencies to discuss possible means of engagement in India’s development cooperation. A second strategy has showcased the domestic and international contributions of Indian CSOs through a number of policy research and case studies (PRIA, 2016; Arora and Chand, 2015). The combination of these two strategies by Indian CSOs has just begun to enable meaningful dialogues and mutual appreciation, but CSOs still face a long road toward achieving a respectable place in influencing or formulating development cooperation policy.

4. Towards an Enabling Environment for CSO Engagement

An enabling environment for CSO-led SSC and engagement in India's official development cooperation will require attention on several fronts. Unlike other providers of SSC, such as Brazil and China, the Indian government has yet to come up with consistent policies in this area. Currently, emerging foreign policy priorities drive most official cooperation activities. As our cases have shown, official cooperation practice must recognize the complementarities that Indian CSOs can bring in pursuing social, political, and economic changes in partner countries. We can view these complementarities from two angles: project implementation and strategic partnership.

CSOs could become implementation contractors via a transparent procurement system that would short-list and vet a number of CSOs having different domains of expertise. When the DPA decides to undertake a project in a certain country, it could invite some of these short-listed CSOs to support project appraisal, design, planning, monitoring, evaluation, and impact assessment. The DPA might also identify certain focus areas based on local demand and assessment in a given country. It could then announce a call for proposals from these CSOs to undertake projects addressing the identified focus areas. The DPA could also invite CSOs with relevant expertise to offer on-line as well as face-to-face training and capacity-building programmes through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme (ITEC) and its sister components. As our cases have shown, many CSOs have provided training and capacity-building support to a variety of stakeholders — other CSOs, local government institutions, government functionaries — as an integral part of their projects both within and outside India. Such capacities and experiences could find uses both in ITEC and other official development cooperation programmes.

At the strategic level, the Indian MEA could enter into strategic partnerships with Indian CSOs that have international reputations and relationships with other Southern countries. Such partnerships could focus on South-South alliance-building around specific issues such as climate change, global governance reforms, the SDGs, and so forth. These partnerships could act as catalysts for policy advocacy in transnational settings, e.g., with UN agencies, the BRICS institutions, the India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA) Fund, the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, European Union, and so on. This will require the creation of a space for policy dialogue and exchanges between CSOs and the institutions involved in SSC.

For all their experience and track record, Indian CSOs also have gaps in their capacities that might impact effectiveness or efficiency. Several studies have identified weaknesses in large-scale project management, research, analysis, impact assessment, strategic thinking and planning (Tandon and Bandyopadhyay, 2001; Tandon, 2002; Bandyopadhyay and Dwivedi, 2002). Investment in strengthening CSO knowledge and capacities, both in partner countries and in India, should figure strongly in the framework of cooperation between CSOs and the Indian government.

However, certain irritants need removal for these entities to work together, and both must strive to promote an environment of mutual trust. As discussed earlier, the current legal framework, created to regulate and control CSOs rather than to enable their contributions, needs a complete overhaul. The current Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, Societies Registration Act, and Income Tax Act supply cases in point. They should be replaced by an enabling law ensuring CSO transparency and accountability, as well as removing obstacles for their efficient functioning.

5. Conclusion

Many developing countries now prefer India's approach to development cooperation because of intrinsic features that promote mutuality and authentic partnership. However, the concept, design, and implementation of this cooperation largely takes place between governments, and only sometimes involves private and public enterprises. Notably, among SSC providers, India has diverse and capable CSOs with decades of international development experience and considerable, well-earned capacities. They have proven track records of facilitating sustainable social, political, and economic changes in India and in other developing countries. However, the Indian government has left such capacities and relations largely untapped and underused. If it could harness these capacities — particularly the soft power that resides within a diverse civil society — with an enabling policy framework, it could further bolster the current development- cooperation compact. As the volume, diversity, and complexities of India's cooperation increase, a robust institutional architecture becomes imperative, one that includes the institutionalized engagement of Indian CSOs. Dialogues between Indian CSOs and government in this direction have begun, but these require an enabling and trusting environment that can provide clarity for future institutionalized mechanisms.

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