



# Civil society dynamics

*Shaping roles,  
navigating contexts*

Margit van Wessel, Suparana Katyaini, Yogesh Mishra, Farhat Naz,  
B. Rajeshwari, Rita Manchanda, Reetika Syal, Nandini Deo, Sarbeswar Sahoo



## Civil society dynamics: Shaping roles, navigating contexts

Margit van Wessel, Suparana Katyaini, Yogesh Mishra, Farhat Naz, B. Rajeshwari, Rita Manchanda, Reetika Syal, Nandini Deo, Sarbeswar Sahoo

File W 08.311.104

Research focus: Political roles of CSOs in LLMICs

December 2019

© The authors



IIT Delhi



LEHIGH  
UNIVERSITY

# Content

Preface | 3

1. **Introduction** | 4

2. **Findings: Representation** | 6

Construction of representation: a variety of forms | 6

Construction of representation: a negotiated position | 8

Policy recommendations | 10

3. **Findings: Collaboration** | 11

Complementarity in collaborations for disaster risk reduction | 11

Complementarity in collaborations for sex workers' rights | 12

Autonomy and capacity development | 13

Policy recommendations | 14

4. **Findings: State–civil society interactions** | 16

Push and shove: struggle over civic space | 16

Co-construction of CSOs' roles in collaborations with the state | 17

Policy recommendations | 19

5. **Synthesis: Contextualized agency** | 20

6. **Recommendations: Starting from the South** | 23

References | 27

Annex: CSOs included in the study | 29



## Preface

This report was developed in the context of the research programme Supporting the political role of CSOs for inclusive development. Assumptions underlying Dialogue and Dissent. It presents the results of a research project that examines a set of assumptions underlying the Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs policy programme *Dialogue and Dissent. Strategic Partnerships for Lobby and Advocacy* and addresses a set of research and policy questions formulated by the Ministry. It does so from a perspective and set of interests defined by the research team. The purpose of the research is to inform future government policy and CSO activity to support and strengthen civil society advocacy roles advancing inclusive development.

The report is the result of collaboration between Wageningen University & Research, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, and Lehigh University.

The research was administered by NWO-WOTRO Science for Global Development.

We wish to thank here the staff members of many CSOs in India and the Netherlands who have taken the time to speak with us, share information, and connect us with others.

Further publications from this project will be made available on our project website [www.civil-society-research-collective.org](http://www.civil-society-research-collective.org) (online by January 2020).

For further information, please contact project leader Margit van Wessel at [margit.vanwessel@wur.nl](mailto:margit.vanwessel@wur.nl).

# 1. Introduction

Our research seeks to relate to the widespread aim of helping to make sure that development is owned by people and organizations ‘on the ground’. A long-term goal in the field of international development is to create conditions where responsibilities and leadership increasingly lie with Southern CSOs (Banks et al., 2015; Forsch, 2018; Goodman, 2016; Miller-Dawkins, 2017; Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

If Southern CSOs are to do more leading, their contexts, understandings, and ambitions must move more to the centre of programmes and collaborations. Our research can help donors and Northern CSOs to establish what that would mean in practice when it comes to fundamental questions regarding whom to work with, what to work for, how to collaborate, and what this implies for various actors’ roles.

We take the perspective that CSOs navigate the possibilities of their roles as agents, constructing these roles from their own perspectives and capacities while engaging with opportunities and constraints within their contexts. Different collaborations may or may not strengthen Southern CSOs’ roles, from their perspectives, and the nature and added value of donors’ and Northern CSOs’ involvement cannot be taken as given.

Our project is situated in India. We approach India as a Southern context with the potential to offer insight into the ways in which contextualized understandings of CSOs as agents can help to develop perspectives on how civil society’s roles take shape and on how donors, Northern CSOs, and other Southern CSOs can potentially contribute to these roles.

Our objective is to contribute to a guiding framework for donors and CSOs seeking to support collaborations that provide more leading advocacy roles of CSOs in the global South. We focus on developing deeper understandings of the ways CSO in the Global South shape their roles, from the starting point that these understandings, foregrounding Southern CSOs as agents, can help make more Southern leadership possible: more imaginable for Northern actors, and more clearly justifiable. In short, we seek to help envision and enact collaborative relations differently. We explore CSOs’ construction of their roles from three angles that are fundamental to their advocacy: representation, collaboration, and state–civil society interactions. More specifically, we address the following main research questions:

- How do different types of CSOs seeking to represent vulnerable and marginalized sections of Indian society construct their roles as representatives?
- How do different types of CSOs seeking to represent vulnerable and marginalized sections of Indian society construct their roles in collaborations with other CSOs?
- How do interactions with the state shape the roles of CSOs seeking to represent vulnerable and marginalized sections of Indian society?

From the angles of representation, collaboration, and state–civil society interactions, we also explore how questions of autonomy emerge in the construction of CSOs’ roles and how can these be addressed.

Our research focus is on the political roles of CSOs in low- and lower-middle-income countries. However, because civic space is emerging as an important contextual dimension shaping CSOs’ advocacy roles, we relate to that theme as well. Additionally, because our findings and recommendations have implications for aid chains, our work also touches on that theme.

To include knowledge-, needs-, and rights-based advocacy in our sample of cases, we studied CSOs working on two themes: disaster risk reduction (DRR) and the rights of marginalized sections of society. We collected data in three Indian states (Gujarat, Bihar, and Jharkhand) and in the capital city, Delhi. Six full-time researchers carried out approximately 250 interviews with civil society and state actors, supported by the three principal investigators. In addition to these interviews, the researchers studied CSOs' internal documents, CSOs' websites, government policy documents, other public documentation, grey literature, and news media. Some of the researchers also attended CSOs' internal meetings and workshops.

Below, we first present our main findings on the three angles explored (representation, collaboration, and state–civil society interactions), relating them to the specific assumptions, research questions, and policy questions laid out in the *Assumptions Underlying Dialogue and Dissent* research programme (Kamstra, 2017, pp. 37–42) and presenting recommendations that flow directly from the findings on these three angles. This is followed by a synthesis and a set of overarching recommendations.

## 2. Findings: Representation

Two case studies were conducted on the theme of representation. We first present the findings on each of these studies in light of the assumptions and research questions identified for the *Assumptions* research programme. We then present policy recommendations addressing the policy questions identified for the programme.

The case studies both addressed the assumptions that 1) CSOs represent societal groupings and interests and can thereby contribute to inclusive and sustainable development and 2) different types of CSOs have different and complementary representative roles. These studies addressed the Assumptions research question asking how different types of CSOs contribute differently (by performing various political roles and advocacy strategies) to changing or maintaining power relations. To develop a deeper understanding of the nature of the ‘inclusiveness’ pursued by these CSOs, we focus in particular on the nature of relations with constituencies that organizations construct and the implications of this for the resulting form of representation of people who are vulnerable and marginalized.

### Construction of representation: a variety of forms

In a study of Indian CSOs collaborating on DRR and working in the Indian states of Gujarat and Bihar, we comparatively explored the roles that these CSOs construct for themselves to represent people who are vulnerable to disaster risk. We interviewed staff members from 18 formal CSOs that were selected to obtain a diverse sample in terms of their focus on disaster risks and issues, as well as the societal groups with which they engage. To develop a deeper understanding of the nature of the ‘inclusiveness’ pursued by these CSOs, we focused in particular on the relations that organizations construct with constituencies and the implications of these relations for the resulting form of representation.

Among the studied CSOs, we found areas of both commonality and divergence that are significant for understanding CSOs’ representative roles. A first commonality is that most CSOs construct their role as that of an intermediary rather than an actor directly channelling or integrating the views of their constituencies. A second commonality is that all the studied CSOs construct the vulnerability they address in terms of social inequality. A third commonality is that roles evolve over time and shift with context—the same CSO may well take up multiple different roles. A fourth commonality is that representation takes shape through the intertwining of capacity development, service delivery, and advocacy, as organizations engage in representation in multiple ways through the diverse opportunities they create in their development work.

In terms of areas of divergence, first, we found that roles take a range of forms, depending on the type of role that the CSO constructs for itself in relation to its constituencies, other CSOs, and the state. Apart from diverse intermediary roles, we also identified facilitation of representation and self-representation. A second divergence among the CSOs is found in the range of dimensions of social inequality (i.e. caste, age, gender, religion, physical ability, and ethnicity) CSOs choose to prioritize in their relations with communities, other CSOs, and the state.

A closer look makes it clear that roles are constructed through CSOs’ intricate ways of relating to constituencies, the state, and other CSOs in pursuing varied forms of inclusiveness in DRR. With limited space for CSOs to represent groups in direct interaction with the state in ‘invited’ spaces (facilitated by the state), CSOs represent also in the context of project implementation,



and through representation in 'invented', 'claimed' (i.e. self-organized) spaces (Gaventa, 2006). Through their representation in these spaces, CSOs try to advance change while also enhancing the strength of their voices to stimulate the opening up of invited spaces to these voices in the longer term. The studied CSOs described six forms of representation, which they framed in the terms described below.

Organizations that identify their form of representation as that of *observers* value their long-term associations with communities, building a local presence and emphasizing their accessibility to community members. In collaboration with other CSOs, observers empower vulnerable people to access resources intended for them and to take control over decisions affecting their lives. Seeking social transformation, observers represent the needs and interests of groups facing social exclusion (e.g. indigenous groups/tribal people, groups facing caste-based discrimination, and women from multiple social groups). This is done to advance 'social inclusion' in policies and plans at state and national levels, largely in invited spaces and to some extent in invented spaces of interaction with the state.

Organizations that identify their form of representation as *grassroots technical* value priorities at the grassroots level and use diverse forms of technical expertise (i.e. architectural, engineering, or livelihood expertise) to advance these priorities. The identification of grassroots priorities is enabled by having members of the community as members of the organization. These CSOs empower vulnerable people to leverage resources from the state's social safety net schemes concerning issues where technical expertise plays an instrumental role, such as housing and livelihoods. Interactions with the state are predominantly in invented/claimed spaces, involving collaboration with other CSOs and directing continuous effort towards demonstrating the relevance of their technical expertise to achieve grassroots priorities using state policy provisions (i.e. resources from social safety net schemes).

Organizations that identify themselves as *knowledge brokers/partners* value various knowledge systems and strive to 'empower with' people (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002), working together to enable socially disadvantaged groups to access knowledge by engaging with both vulnerable and non-vulnerable groups. To access vulnerable people's knowledge, knowledge partners have to build trust and relations with the community over time. Knowledge partners seek to overcome the power relations in society that restrict disadvantaged groups' access to knowledge. They build vulnerable people's capacity to be knowledge carriers and representatives themselves. In collaboration with other CSOs, knowledge brokers/partners influence change towards the inclusion of the knowledge of vulnerable people and experts on community practices and policies, largely through interaction with the state in invented/claimed spaces.

Organizations that identify themselves as *facilitators* value the inclusion of diverse perspectives in networks and collaborative efforts to address the multidimensionality of disaster risk. They facilitate interactions among different and complementary CSOs in a network to help CSOs access each other's resources and capacities. They also facilitate vulnerable groups' access to social safety net schemes by empowering them to make use of these schemes, and seek to facilitate groups' self-representation. They do this for example by creating space for this self-representation in local meetings, where certain caste groups or women tend to be excluded. Facilitators link with communities through community members selected by the CSOs as community representatives.

Organizations that see their role as that of *sensitizers* value the rights and entitlements of historically excluded and disadvantaged groups (e.g. Dalits and Mahadalits) and work to empower

these groups 'from within' (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002), building their self-esteem and awareness of their rights and entitlements. Sensitizers aim to address persistent and historic caste-based discrimination in the pursuit of social change towards equality through inclusion in development. Sensitizers' sphere of influence is largely at the level of communities and local governing agencies, and they work in collaboration with facilitators.

Organizations that identify themselves as *advisors* value the interpretation of international-, national-, and state-level policies to inform actions where disaster strikes. In invited interactions with the state and other stakeholders, advisors give visibility to the issues of indigenous groups, religious minorities, and 'invisible' groups (e.g. migrants) who otherwise lack the required resources and capacity to attain representation in policy processes. Advisors' engagement with communities is through direct interaction. Advisors interact with other CSOs, refraining, however, from engaging in formal collaborations.

A first general insight drawn from this study is that representative roles are specific, but this specificity normally remains implicit, even though it has important implications for representation. A second general insight is that CSOs' representation of people who are vulnerable to disaster risk is mediated by the CSOs' engagement in indirect representation in diverse ways, rather than by the integration and articulation of vulnerable people's voices more directly. CSOs' construction of their representative roles incorporates a range of considerations: relations with constituencies, the state, and other CSOs; specific constructions of the vulnerabilities and organizational objectives with which the CSO works; and the nature of the resources and capacities the CSO has to offer. Finally, over its lifespan, a CSO can take on more than one of the representative roles described here. The evolving nature of a CSO's role should be understood as a process that is relational and non-linear rather than sequential (cf. Kontinen & Millstein, 2017, in a rare study exploring the fluidity and diversity of CSOs' roles).

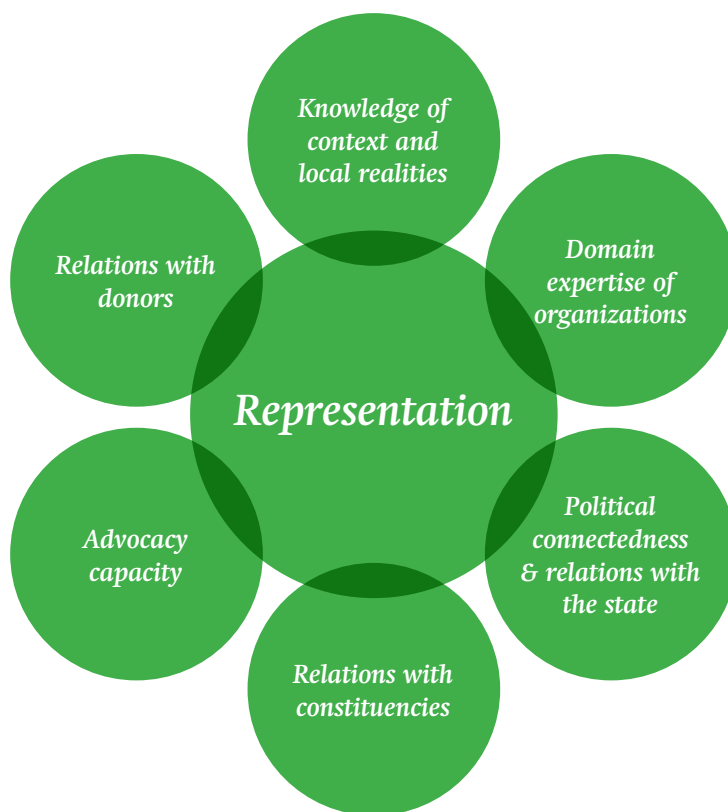
## **Construction of representation: a negotiated position**

A second study on representation similarly focused on how CSOs construct their representative roles. This study sought to capture this construction as carried out by CSOs seeking to represent marginalized groups such as tribal people and women. For this study, we interviewed the staff/ leadership of 12 CSOs (formal nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], social movements, and grassroots organizations). A first finding is that representation is often constructed from a position of being different—the idea that having specific qualities is what makes representation possible. Representation thus does not necessarily imply articulating the views of constituencies. Rather, representation often means performing the role of an intermediary between constituencies and the state—connecting marginalized groups and the state, raising people's awareness of entitlements, articulating issues and needs, and translating to facilitate communication between marginalized groups and the state. The capacity to represent is constructed as dependent on the CSO's expertise, experience, and knowledge of a context and a group, which makes it possible to translate their issues and needs (coming to varying extents from the people themselves) in light of state entitlements and possibilities determined by politics and policy. Notably, although CSOs commonly claim a leading role for marginalized groups, many CSOs involved in this study exhibit little facilitation or inclusion of leadership emerging from these marginalized groups themselves.

A second finding is that, across these organizations, notwithstanding their 'otherness', CSOs construct the legitimacy of their representative roles in terms of their longstanding relationships with marginalized groups, which the CSOs say make it possible for them to understand and articulate

these groups' needs and/or voices. Interactions take varied forms such as making visits, posting office-bearers locally, appointing community members as resource persons or mobilizers, and working in specific localities for extended periods. The extent of these relations varies and changes over time. For example, as an organization expands in size and portfolio, such connections may diminish. The degree to which CSOs are open to the viewpoints of their constituencies as leading in their representation also varies.

Moreover, in constructing their representation, CSOs also engage with the possibilities for representation, which they see as being created or hindered by contextual factors. In particular, they consider their own political connectedness and relations with the state and with donors, which often have their own agendas that match the CSOs' ambitions and perspectives to varying extents. A third and synthesizing finding is therefore that representation integrates internal, relational, and contextual considerations. In light of this finding, the idea of CSOs seeking to be the voice of society needs to be reconsidered. Under the given conditions, we found representation to be a negotiated position. The figure below shows the considerations interviewees discussed as playing a role in this negotiation.



Our broader explorations of representation revealed that marginalized groups (e.g. Dalits and tribal people) also organize to 'speak for themselves', vocally contesting their marginality as well as the legitimacy of CSOs that did not emerge from these groups to represent them. These CSOs formed within marginalized groups may also contest the capacity or willingness of other CSOs, as discussed above, to effectively counter the structural inequalities faced by marginalized groups.

## Policy recommendations

A first policy question addressed by these studies is as follows: What type(s) of CSOs should be supported to change power relations for achieving inclusive sustainable development and (gender) equality? Our most basic recommendation is that decisions on what types(s) of CSOs to support should be based on an examination of the diversity of CSOs within a particular context, as well as their contributions to inclusive and sustainable development through representation. In the DRR study, we found that different forms of representation matter because they can contribute to inclusiveness (in terms of issues, groups, and forms of empowerment and change). In the study on the representation of marginalized groups, we found that different CSOs have varying organizational strengths and differing degrees and forms of engagement with constituencies, which can contribute to differences in forms of change and inclusiveness. However, it is important to take a critical stance with regard to the ways in which advocacy is rooted in relations with constituencies. It is also important to consider grassroots forms of representation as alternatives to more intermediary forms, partly because of the aforementioned contestation of the legitimacy of the representation of marginalized groups by others who are ‘speaking for them’.

We also addressed a second policy question: What kind of support do CSOs need, and from whom, to fulfil their specific political roles? The kinds of support required can emerge from an analysis of the diversity and relative contributions of different types of CSOs, which shape their representative roles differently. To illustrate, CSOs working in DRR voiced differing support needs, rooted in their varying representative roles: *Grassroots technical* CSOs seek financial resources to maintain a continued presence at the grassroots level and to build technical capacities specific to DRR. *Sensitizers*, in contrast, seek financial resources to reach out to remotely located groups with the aims of generating awareness about their rights and entitlements and building capacity for further awareness raising. These different kinds of support would strengthen the representative roles sought by the CSOs involved—something that naturally falls in line with the ambition of advancing Southern leadership. At the same time, to counter the fragmentation of representation that may be fed by these differences, support for networking among CSOs may contribute to the development of shared perspectives and to the integration of groups addressing different social inequalities, as well as to the development of critical mass for engagement with advocacy targets.

### 3. Findings: Collaboration

On the theme of collaboration, three case studies were conducted. We first present the findings from each of these studies in light of the assumptions and research questions identified for the Assumptions research programme. We then present policy recommendations addressing the policy questions identified for the programme.

#### Complementarity in collaborations for disaster risk reduction

A study of Indian CSOs collaborating on DRR across India explored how these organizations see the added value of collaboration with different types of organizations. We interviewed staff members from 11 CSOs with experience collaborating in the domain of DRR. This project addressed the following assumptions: 1) Collaboration with Northern CSOs and donors contributes to enabling the representative roles of Southern CSOs; 2) different types of CSOs have different and complementary representative roles; and 3) promoting civil society's political roles requires a long-term, context-specific approach, which incorporates mutual learning, trust, and local ownership. The study addressed the following Assumptions research question: How do different types of CSOs contribute differently (by performing various political roles and advocacy strategies) to changing or maintaining power relations?

We found that CSOs involved in DRR are actively developing approaches and tools, conducting training, raising awareness, and advocating to influence policy. These organizations agree that reducing the risks associated with disaster is important, but they are otherwise diverse in terms of their organizational background, scope, and focus. There has been little attention paid to such diversity in the literature on civil society. The attention that has been directed to this topic has mostly been focused on the complementarity between Northern and Southern CSOs (e.g. Keck & Sikkink, 2014), often in the context of aid chains. In our view, we therefore needed to explore the complementarities seen by CSOs in Southern contexts, considering, for example, that their orientations are often likely to be largely domestic (Sriskandarajah & Tiwana, 2014) and may also be construed independently from the roles that are formally assigned to them through aid chains. In this study, we explored the value of the diversity of civil society engaged in DRR from the perspectives of the Southern CSOs involved. We found that many organizations see a range of other CSOs as complementary to their own organizations in ways that encourage collaboration or make collaboration helpful for achieving their goals. We identified the following forms of complementarity:

1. Complementarity in capacity: ranging from resource mobilization to knowledge transfer, training, project management, and organizational strengthening;
2. Complementarity within a geographical landscape: adding value to the work of CSOs engaging within the same geographical landscape with differing forms of expertise and knowledge;
3. Complementarity in terms of perspectives: shedding light on issues from diverse angles (e.g. humanitarian, rights-based, and environmental);
4. Complementarity of networks: different CSOs can facilitate each other's access to diverse communicative arenas nationally and internationally, centring on important shared interests (i.e. funding, knowledge, and advocacy); and
5. Complementarity between advocacy at different levels (subnational, national, and international): Collaboration facilitates the representation of each other's perspectives at various levels of influence.



Collaboration thus has added value because of the diversity of the CSOs involved. Importantly, organizations identified these complementarities from a clearly established understanding of their own roles and identities—the complementarities were described as just that, emphasizing the added value of collaboration rather than the redefining of roles through collaboration. Notably, although international complementarities matter (e.g. for funding, knowledge sharing, capacity development, and the spread of values and norms), most of the relevant complementarities the interviewees identified for their CSOs involved other CSOs working in the Indian context. These domestic complementarities were both context-specific (e.g. expertise on vulnerabilities rooted in local social inequalities or climatic conditions) and generic (e.g. project management) in nature.

## **Complementarity in collaborations for sex workers' rights**

A study of a network collaboration on sex workers' rights explored the roles of different types of civil society actors representing this marginalized group. Conducting interviews with people from a range of different CSOs involved, we found that sex workers in India are a fairly organized group, advocating for their rights in multiple ways. We also found that the organization of representation here is complex, with different forms of organizations playing different complementary roles. The study addressed the following *Assumptions* research question: How do different types of CSOs contribute differently (by performing various political roles and advocacy strategies) to changing or maintaining power relations?

A national-level network represents Indian sex workers through awareness raising, policy advocacy, and the provision of different forms of support to sex workers. This network plays the role of integrating the various views and diverse issues of sex workers from different parts of the country, connecting the community to professional/technical support groups, such as CSOs providing legal support, and creating a platform for sex workers to highlight their issues. The network also takes up national-level issues such as legislation, but it works in close collaboration with community-based organizations (CBOs) from different parts of the country, which, in turn, represent their constituencies. These CBOs play the role of bringing in diverse issues such as police violence, the inaccessibility of medical facilities and education for their children, unsafe brothels, and the lack of recognition of their work. These issues vary across regions and for different constituencies, which can consist of home-based, brothel-based, or street-based sex workers, as well as female, transgender, or male sex workers. The CBOs' representation brings in this diversity and provides legitimacy to the network. The role of the network is to serve as a place of connection and learning for CBOs, which try to implement best practices from other regions and policy decisions made in the larger network.

Representation is also realized through support from non-sex workers who play various roles. Sex workers fight for their legal rights, demanding new laws or the prevention or change of laws that negatively impact them. Legal support is needed to defend against abuse from the police and the denial of citizens' rights. Here, collaboration with lawyers and CSOs specializing in legal advocacy plays an important role.

The network's representative role requires strategizing regarding their stance at local, national, and international levels. Communication, coordination, linking, and convening require resources (e.g. monetary resources, technical resources, and capacities), which a transnational CSO in the network offers. This CSO also plays the role of translator, listening to accounts of how sex workers understand their rights, entitlements, and aspirations. It seeks to help them to articu-

late these understandings by proposing language in which to frame their rights that will both do justice to the sex workers' perceptions and resonate in policymaking arenas.

International organizations also play a role in the representation of sex workers. One organization connected with Indian sex workers is a fund that advocates for funding for sex workers' rights, raises money for sex workers' movements, and advocates to generate support for more grants for sex workers' rights.

Beyond these forms of organization, we also found that, over the years, particular individuals from the medical and legal professions have influenced the representation of sex workers. In Kolkata, for example, the largest network of sex workers was developed through the leadership and vision of an individual doctor who mobilized sex workers from a brothel area to organize for the purpose of addressing the problems they faced in their everyday lives. In both subtle and explicit ways, this individual influenced how sex workers view themselves and how they see and articulate their rights.

In contrast to the study on DRR collaboration, which found content-centred complementarities across diverse formal CSOs, the study on network collaboration on sex workers' rights revealed a much wider range of diversity, allowing dissimilar CSOs to complement each other in a network. Here, the presence of different (more or less formal) forms of organizing and organizations taking on roles in their own individual ways strengthen the network's efforts in terms of substantive representation rooted in constituencies, integration, communication, connection, coordination, translation, implementation, expertise, leadership, and fundraising. Importantly, roles are not a quality of 'types' of organizations as such—it is within the network that roles take shape.

## **Autonomy and capacity development**

One of the assumptions of *Dialogue and Dissent's* theory of change is that CSOs require autonomy and ownership to perform their representative roles. At the same time, it is widely understood that autonomy is easily compromised because of the power relations between partners. In the study described in this section, we focused on this matter in the context of capacity development, especially as it is conceived in terms of training. Capacity development through training assumes that the trainer has knowledge that the trainee lacks. Capacity development as a transfer of knowledge thus impinges on autonomy, creating a tension between the two concepts. We carried out a study on the collaboration between a women's rights CSO in Delhi and its seven partner CSOs in the Indian state of Jharkhand and on individual training participants. The Delhi-based CSO is highly sensitive to the impact of power relations in capacity development and seeks to address these systematically in its capacity development practice. We explored this CSO's work as an inspirational example of practice from which broader lessons may be drawn. This CSO focuses on the empowerment of elected women representatives in local government bodies. Through collaboration with the national-level CSO, local partner CSOs provide training for these women, enabling them to speak out and fulfil their roles as elected representatives. The training programme seeks to address the problem that women in India are often placed in official representative roles to meet quotas, with male family members making the decisions behind the scenes. Thus, the programme aims to combat structural gender inequalities in Indian society.

We found that it is possible to address the tension between capacity development and autonomy for individual training participants by focusing on informal processes such as relationship building, establishing connections with the community, and approaching capacity development as a shared journey between the trainers and the trainees. A large part of the autonomous transformation occurs through informal engagements carried out over time, in negotiation with the context. This allows the participants to take small but significant steps towards autonomy—we saw this emerging in the form of control over time, mobility, and space. In other contexts, these steps could take other forms. Our findings suggest that such an approach leads to the realization of what we call ‘narrative autonomy’ for the participants. This autonomy is understood as being relational, relative, and contextual, with trainees creating their own narrative meaning. It centres on trainees making the training process ‘their own’, as self-reflective people creating new identities and roles for themselves in their own contexts, with support from trainers, who engage with them in ways that help to facilitate this process.

The partners in this programme experience autonomy because there is a sense of informality in their relationships with the Delhi-based CSO. Most partners described this autonomy as experiencing dignity and respect in the partnership. There is a sense of mutual respect and a ‘friendship’-based partnership, with space for critical reflection on key decisions, recognition of partners’ strengths, and a sense of shared responsibility. Here, again, formal training programmes for the partners on organizational strengthening are coupled with informal processes including WhatsApp groups and informal telephone conversations, with flexibility for the partners to adjust the training and other activities autonomously. However, implicit and explicit power relations leading the Delhi-based CSO to have a more decisive role on some key decisions cause grievances among the local partners.

## **Policy recommendations**

On the basis of these findings, we addressed the following policy questions: What type(s) of CSOs should be supported to change power relations for achieving inclusive sustainable development and (gender) equality? How and with whom should they collaborate? What kind of support do these organizations need, and from whom, to fulfil their specific political roles?

Our findings indicate that the answers to the questions of ‘What types of CSOs should be supported?’ and ‘With whom they should collaborate?’ cannot be meaningfully answered in a generic sense. When it comes to advocacy collaborations, answers to these questions emerge contextually, as organizations seek to shape their roles while they are embedded in relations with others. For the development of programmes, we recommend exploring complementarities identified by partners. This can help to do justice to the way different CSOs understand what matters and in what contexts, with regard to complementarity, as well as the different roles that complementarities can play in collaboration. In the DRR case, CSOs valued complementarity from the starting point that it could enhance their individual organizational roles. In the sex worker network, complementarities developed more in the context of collective work. Openness to complementarities as they emerge contextually can also facilitate the integration of diverse roles, capacities, perspectives, networks, and levels. Identifying whom to support and with whom to collaborate thus requires a focused and deep analysis of country contexts and of how CSOs are embedded in relations with others.

The answer to the question of what kind of support is needed for advocacy collaboration naturally flows from the above. Needs can be identified on the basis of the diverse roles actors play in a

particular change process. Here, it is important to see support in terms of making a contribution to that process, involving multiple actors who are often interconnected—thus, support becomes more process-centred than intervention-centred. Understandings of potential contributions (i.e. of Northern CSOs or donors) to processes can come from the analysis of the contexts and roles mentioned above. In line with the ambitions stated in the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs policy note on ‘Investing in Global Prospects’ (2018: 94), this approach would help to facilitate the shaping of support that fosters Southern leadership and creates complementary roles for Northern CSOs and donors.

When it comes to capacity development, we recommend a similarly context-embedded and process-centred approach. CSOs seeking to develop capacities through conducting training should recognize—and invest in—informal processes that support the capacity of participants as autonomous actors. This entails engaging with participants as they are embedded in their contexts. In line with this, we recommend approaching autonomy as something trainees achieve relationally, relatively, and contextually, as people reshaping their identities and roles. For CSOs seeking to develop capacities, the capacity to engage with participants as they are embedded in contexts, building autonomous roles that are similarly embedded, is fundamental. Our findings also illustrate how capacity development that transforms power relations for marginalized groups is likely to be slow and to impact everyday realities for the people involved in significant ways.

## 4. Findings: State–civil society interactions

On the theme of state–civil society interactions, we conducted two studies. We first present the findings from each of these studies in light of the assumptions and research questions identified for the *Assumptions* research programme. We then present policy recommendations addressing the policy questions identified for the programme.

In this section, we engage with the following assumptions: 1) CSOs need political space to perform political roles and 2) civic space is shrinking in many contexts. Engaging with these assumptions from a perspective that emphasizes dynamics, relations, and context, we also relate to the following assumptions: 1) A more flexible and context-specific approach is needed, ensuring local ownership, embeddedness, and local legitimacy; 2) when pressured, informed, and/or persuaded by CSOs, states and companies change their policies and practices, and societal groups change their norms, values, and practices to be more sustainable, equitable, and inclusive; 3) different CSOs have differing opportunities and challenges in restrictive environments; and 4) because states and societies are such complex and multi-layered phenomena, they always have multiple entry points, even in restrictive contexts. Here, we relate to the following research questions developed for the *Assumptions* research programme: What role do various actors have in promoting and/or obstructing political space? How does shrinking political space affect the way CSOs organize? How does this affect their political role? How does shrinking political space affect the way CSOs organize?

### Push and shove: struggle over civic space

The first study of state–civil society interaction explored the dynamics around civic space where both the state and civil society engage. Approximately 50 interviews were conducted at national, local, and state levels with the staff/leadership of CSOs doing rights-based advocacy, state-controlled NGOs, members of the national parliament, state-level government ministers, and civil servants. In line with recent research (Hossain et al., 2018), we found that civic space in India is *changing* more than it is shrinking in a straightforward manner: Space contracts for some, expands for others, and is navigated strategically to open up again.

It is well established that changes in legal, financial, and regulatory controls have constricted civic space in India, especially for democratic claims-making activists and those who are critical of key economic interests such as the extractive industries. However, we identified parallel developments that have received much less attention—the redefining of the terms of civic action and the entry and takeover of civic space by new actors. The advance of hybrid governmental/nongovernmental civic action structures has created bureaucratic governmentalities that privilege corporate formations. This includes, for example, the spread of government-controlled and government-headed ‘loyal’ organizations that have displaced NGOs involved in mobilizing poor women into self-help collectives to link them to the market and to carry government welfare schemes. Global management companies are also displacing NGOs in the competition for government tenders for social programmes. CSOs associated with ‘voluntarism’ and democratic claims-making for the poor and marginalized are thereby being displaced. In their place, there is an expansion of the involvement of technocratic management companies and corporate social responsibility actors in the civic sector. Simultaneously, there is an upsurge of neo-traditionalist groups that are ideologically linked to right-wing groups associated with the present Hindu nationalist government. The mirror image of this process is the squeeze on ‘minority’ faith-based associations and individuals, who are increasingly considered suspect. Finally, freedom of



assembly for democratic claims-making is also coming under pressure. This is evidenced by the arbitrary closure of space for convening meetings and the ad hoc cancellation of public lectures featuring voices calling for democratic rights.

The corollary to this effort to squeeze out and displace existing CSOs is the state-driven discourse depicting NGOs as corrupt, ineffective, anti-development, anti-national, and terrorist-linked. The intent of this discourse is to *delegitimize* CSOs and justify *discrimination* against them, their *displacement*, and *denying* them freedom of assembly, as discussed above. Our main finding on the state's struggle over civic space consists of the identification of this complex system of state strategies that push back certain civil society actors, who are commonly considered to play key roles in addressing exclusion and inequality.

However, even as the state closes and controls space for civic action, CSOs devise strategies to engage in the struggle for civic space in various ways. We identified the following strategies among CSOs:

**1. Working multiple circles of power and through multiple entry points**

This strategy involves understanding that the state is not a monolith and that India's quasi-federalism, with its three-tiered power structure, offers opportunities through multiple levels and layers of lateral contact. Access to national-level power can be used to offset opposition from provincial/state-level fields of power. Local, community-based power can serve as a bulwark in contesting top-down state domination.

**2. Leveraging connections**

Civil society professionals/activists are able to tap into common social and professional networks. Belonging to a shared 'elite' culture, they can use 'insider' access or become state actors as part of the 'revolving door' phenomenon, nurturing and building relations with political allies.

**3. Developing multiple identities**

CSOs faced with displacement may shift their focus, re-inventing their roles and relevance in project delivery/advocacy programmes by identifying gaps in civic action and mobilizing new community-based constituencies around new issue areas or framing their roles and agendas in a way that minimizes the appearance of threat to the state, when needed.

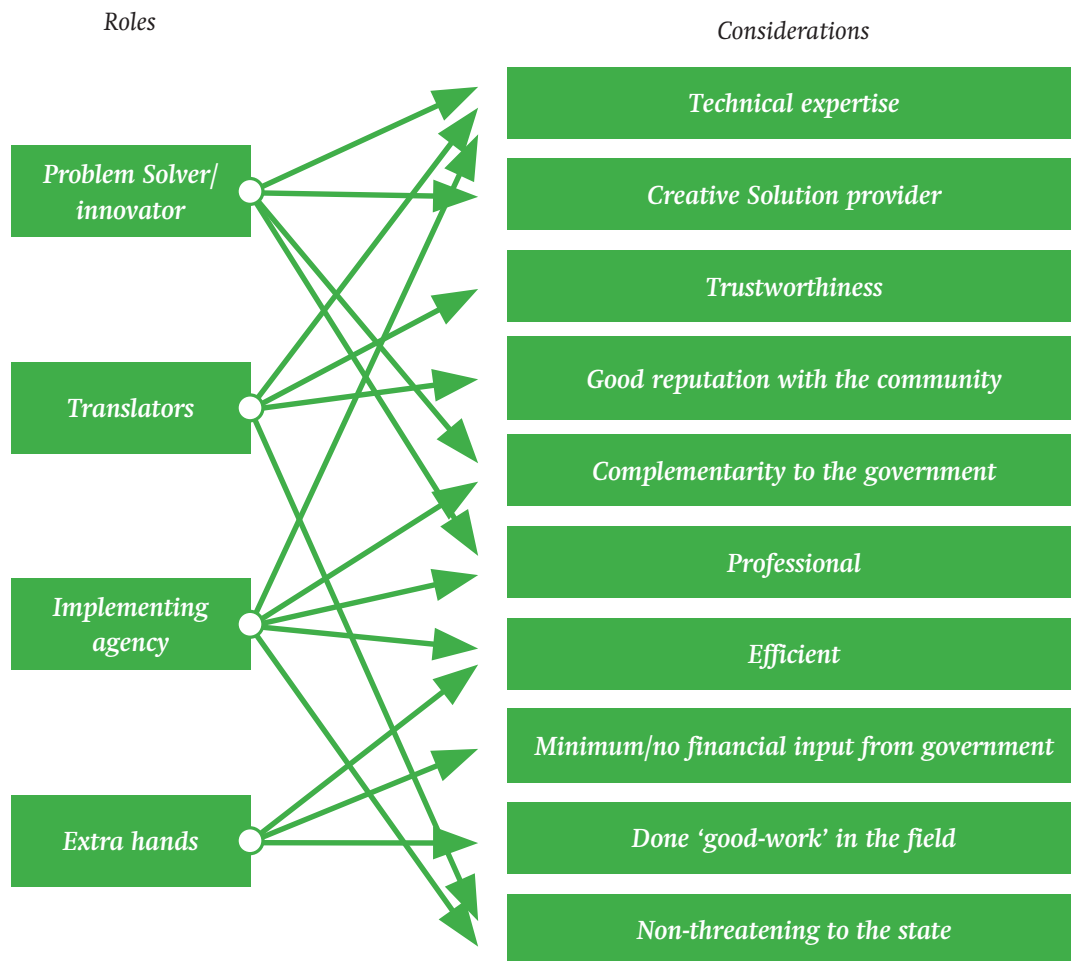
**4. Juggling platforms**

This strategy makes use of the diversity of the civil society sphere, which comprises formal CSOs as well as informal platforms of alliances, campaigns, and movements. Formal CSOs carrying out funded projects within state-set parameters have sometimes simultaneously floated independent, non-registered radical platforms, juggling between the two. In this way, formal CSOs have been involved in social movements confronting the state by demanding accountability and policy change and providing quiet support for convening, logistical funding, and research skills.

## **Co-construction of CSOs' roles in collaborations with the state**

In our study of state–civil society interaction in the context of DRR, we explored the construction of CSOs' roles in their collaborations with the state. We interviewed civil servants working at nine government agencies involved with DRR at state and national levels, as well as representa-

tives of 12 CSOs working with these agencies or seeking to work with them. State–civil society collaborations in DRR hinge mostly on the practical need to develop and implement ‘what needs to be done’, considering the limits of state capacity. A first main finding here is that the state engages with CSOs instrumentally, assigning roles to CSOs through which to further its own objectives, and selects CSOs for collaboration on the basis of considerations in line with this approach, as shown in the figure below.



CSOs involved in collaboration with the state or seeking to engage in such collaboration are sensitive to the considerations and expectations of the state. These CSOs tweak their roles to fit and to appear more relevant, seeking matches with the possible roles on offer and being careful not to overstep perceived limits. Although there may often be a good match between the roles that are offered and sought and a close alignment of state and CSO aims, CSOs also self-censor in light of sensitivities (e.g. avoiding appearing ‘too critical’, contesting state claims, or associating with other CSOs that take confrontational stances). CSOs thus assess the space provided by the state for their work and then manoeuvre their interventions for the maximum benefit of all stakeholders including the state, their own constituencies, and themselves.

Depending on the roles on offer, which may differ according to the openness of particular state agencies or contexts, CSOs may undertake multiple activities in collaboration with the state, such as contributing to policy development, implementation, and resource mobilization. Depending on the CSOs’ capacities, they bring in expert knowledge, knowledge of local realities, and executive capacity; link various types of actors; and act as intermediaries between the state

and certain populations, translating both state policy for local contexts and people's needs in specific contexts for state policy processes. Although space for representative roles may be limited, CSOs do—at least in some cases—seek to insert their agendas into the processes in which they are involved, albeit carefully and sometimes not openly.

## Policy recommendations

The policy question addressed with these studies is as follows: How should the Ministry and Northern CSOs relate to CSOs in restrictive contexts, and how can they best support them in their roles?

A core finding is that civic space is dynamic, with CSOs' roles being co-constructed through interactions between the state and the CSOs. This relativizes the ideal of CSO autonomy (a commonly stated finding) but emphasizes the *struggle over space* rather than a *lack of space*. To engage with CSOs' contextualized agency within these dynamics, we make the following recommendations.

To enable CSOs to perform their diverse roles, we recommend supporting diversity in organizational forms and capacities. Relatedly, we recommend that donors and policy officials build flexibility into programme design and funding structures to enable civic actors to navigate multiple identities and juggle platforms—both informal and formal—to carve out spaces for CSOs to advocate.

Here, it is important to draw attention to the insidious ways in which states may undermine civil society advocacy, not only by constraining CSOs' access to the state and to the space needed to organize, mobilize, and act, but also by obstructing the trust and legitimacy that may develop between CSOs and their constituencies. In addition to seeking to pre-empt the articulation of alternatives to state perspectives, the state may also hinder relations between CSOs and the people, which are the basis of CSOs' representative roles. We therefore recommend supporting CSO activities that protect and enhance both engagement between CSOs and citizens and CSOs' role of articulating alternatives, especially in the public sphere.

Considering the complexity of civic space and the fluidity of roles, we recommend recognizing the multi-layered and multi-level scope of state–civil society interactions, through which multiple entry points may be found to conduct advocacy. We also urge the questioning of the adequacy of epistemic and donor policy frameworks that maintain a simple distinction between service delivery and advocacy because, through service delivery, CSOs can engage in social transformation via mobilization, capacity development, and networking, as well as the careful insertion of agendas into policy processes.

Finally, we encourage donors and other stakeholders to consider an issue that was raised by our study: The state and CSOs may be aligned in their ambitions to address certain inequalities, vulnerabilities, and exclusions. At the same time, because of state pressures, space for representation that is critical of the state may be limited. In these types of contexts, collaborations with the state may open up space for the careful insertion of agendas as interdependencies and trust develop, or for the under-the-radar inclusion of perspectives in, for example, policy implementation. However, these same close relations with the state may also contribute to silencing CSOs because CSOs may seek to protect these relations. We recommend that donors and other stakeholders consider under what conditions to support CSOs navigating these opportunities and constraints.

## 5. Synthesis: Contextualized agency

Our studies on representation show that representative roles are highly diverse, and a result of dynamics between CSOs and their environments. Rather than directly representing constituencies, CSOs are intermediaries giving shape to their representations, integrating internal, relational, and contextual considerations—a negotiated position. Their contributions to inclusive and sustainable development are therefore also diverse in nature and involve differing degrees and forms of engagement with constituencies. Importantly, these diversities are significant yet implicit—not forming an established part of CSOs’ articulated and communicated self-understandings. They are learned about through engagement with them.

Our studies on collaboration show similarly implicit but important diversities. Different types of complementarity between CSOs working in the Indian context emerged, in terms of capacities as much as roles, and for the advancement of organizational as well as collective objectives. These complementarities revealed roles for international CSOs, but were in many ways domestic in nature, and emergent rather than planned through programmes. An important insight here is that roles are not a quality of ‘types’ of organizations as such, as much as contributions to change processes taking shape through networking.

Our studies on state–civil society interactions show how CSOs’ roles are not simply ‘given’, considering the degree of civic space. They take shape in interplay with the state. Engaging with civic space constrictions, CSOs seeking to articulate and mobilize around development alternatives navigate possibilities strategically. CSOs seeking to collaborate with the state monitor how requirements develop and adapt to these, while at least sometimes trying to insert agendas within the spaces of collaboration thus created.

When we compare results across the two themes, some similarities can be pointed out. First, in both themes, we find complementarity and networking at the domestic level to be important yet commonly underlet aspects of CSO roles. Secondly, we find that CSOs’ roles representing marginalized and vulnerable groups are often intermediary in nature. Such representation commonly consists of connecting such groups and the state, raising people’s awareness of entitlements, articulating issues and needs as they conceive of them, and translating between groups and the state. In many cases, capacity development plays a role, but efforts are often not geared to enhancing the capacity and resources for marginalized groups to represent themselves in a more direct sense. In both themes, however, different cases of such more directly emancipatory ‘self-representation’ could be distinguished. Third, when it comes to state–civil society interactions, we found apprehensions concerning civic space and careful manoeuvring of relations with the state in both themes.

Some differences can also be pointed out. First, in the theme of disaster risk reduction, we commonly find CSOs adapting to constrictions of civic space relatively more, seeking not to endanger collaborative relations with the state. When it comes to CSOs working on rights of marginalized sections of society, we see more strategizing to protect space for articulation of alternatives and mobilization. In both themes, however, CSOs find the space for advocacy roles diminished in recent years. Secondly, in the theme of rights for marginalized sections of Indian society we find a relatively large role for informal organizing and social movements (often in complementary roles with professional CSOs), while disaster risk reduction CSOs are largely professional in nature. Combined with the different ways of relating to the state, this creates different capacities for articulation of alternatives and public mobilization around these.

Our findings are context-specific, or potentially so, in certain ways. They will at least partly have their roots in the nature of the two selected thematic domains, the specific nature of the CSOs we worked with, and the Indian context. However, considering the similarities across the two selected domains and CSOs, the common importance of context for advocacy more generally (Jordan and Van Tuijl, 2000), and the commonality of patterns of civic space issues as found in India, our findings arguably are generalizable at least in some respects.

A first overarching finding from our work is that CSOs' advocacy roles and contributions to development can only be understood if we look closely at what CSOs actually do, embedded in relations and contexts and engaging with these dynamically. We call this capacity to act while relating to the context *contextualized agency*. More specifically, we define *contextualized agency* as agency that emerges through how actors relate to the possibilities and constraints of the contextual setting, as interpreted by the actors involved. The following points clarify the concept of contextualized agency:

CSOs shape their roles contextually. In important ways, CSOs' strategizing is grounded in their understandings of their possibilities within their specific domestic contexts. Crucially, the capacity to engage with their own contexts defines their capacity and will to act. International collaborations or influences may often be seen as complementary rather than leading and, ideally, as supportive. Depending on their individual perspectives and capacities, however, CSOs understand their possibilities differently and develop different approaches to these possibilities. CSOs shape their roles while embedded in relations with constituencies, other CSOs, and the state. Engaging their contexts from their own perspectives, CSOs construct the nature of their work and their way of relating to constituencies, decide which approaches to follow, choose partners, and identify agents that may support or oppose their undertakings. Their roles are thus relationally defined rather than being simply a matter of 'traits' such as organizational type, capacities, and preferred strategy.

CSOs' roles are dynamic. These roles evolve depending on how the organizations progress. This, in turn, changes access to and relations with both the state and constituencies. In response to opportunities and barriers that arise in different contexts and at different moments in time, CSOs' roles can change or manifest in different ways.

A second overarching finding is that contextualized agency at least partly explains how CSOs' roles emerge. CSOs engaging the same context may construct very diverse roles. Diversity in civil society is thus not only about organizational form or strategy. It also relates to differences in how CSOs construct their roles through interpreting their contexts and in how they see and engage possibilities and constraints. Agency is not just the capacity to act. It is also the capacity to act on the basis of diverse analyses of possibilities and constraints and using different approaches; these differences lead to very different roles. For example, the representation of marginalized and vulnerable groups can mean very different things. Depending on who is doing the representing, CSOs pursue different possibilities within the same context. In line with this idea, different CSOs respond to the Indian state's constricting of civic space for CSOs in highly divergent ways. This second overarching finding on contextualized agency points to the need to do justice to the agents involved as the organizations that they are—entities engaged in interpretation and action and working from certain perspectives, capacities, and rationales.

A third overarching finding concerns the question of why all of this matters. Because we studied a broad array of CSOs, we were able to clearly observe the diversity among them. This allowed us to expose the nature of some important yet implicit differences among CSOs and to demonstrate that this diversity has implications for CSOs' roles. We learned that it is important to



make sense of and examine the diversity among different CSOs. Given how diverse, implicit, and dynamic their roles are, we cannot take for granted the nature or extent of CSOs' contributions to inclusiveness. We also learned that such diversity is valuable. Diverse CSOs play complementary roles, and different forms of engaging the state can contribute to inclusive and sustainable development in different ways.

A final overarching finding logically flows from the above. Given that roles are shaped to a great extent by navigating the context, contextual understanding is of prime importance. This implies a fundamental role for locally embedded organizations and their capacity to understand and navigate the context. It also implies the need for Northern CSOs and donors to engage with the context.

## 6. Recommendations: Starting from the South

The dominance of Northern CSOs and donors in many North–South collaborations has been widely established and problematized. The solutions proposed thus far mostly address power relations. Some of these are presented in material terms, seeking answers in direct funding. Other proposed solutions seek to reshape working relations, mostly in terms of ‘partnership’—a concept that has itself frequently been problematized. A related discussion addresses the reclaiming and resistance through which some Southern CSOs carve out space for alternatives. Although these perspectives are important for understanding and addressing existing forms of dominance, none of these existing approaches offers direction regarding how to advance Southern CSOs’ leadership in collaborations with Northern CSOs and donors.

Engagement with the contextualized agency of Southern CSOs can offer a way forward. We recommend advancing Southern leadership by ‘starting from the South’. In this approach, we see roles for diverse CSOs—both Southern and Northern—and donors in complementary relations. To strengthen the leadership of Southern CSOs, we advise against starting with programme development led by Northern actors and subsequently identifying suitable partners. Instead, we advise taking the starting point that Southern CSOs are already trying to be something and already pursuing agendas. They are doing these things with an understanding of what is possible and desirable, and often as expert navigators of their own contexts. In important ways, this is what makes their roles possible. They are also frequently already embedded in multiple relations shaping their roles. Their Northern (donor) partner is often just one of these.

However, this does not imply that Southern CSOs always relate effectively to their contexts. Rather, these CSOs may engage with their contexts only in limited ways, and this may be at least partly because of prioritizing donor relations and pressures to perform in a certain way in that relation. Strengthening CSOs that do relate to their contexts can help to turn this pattern around. Moreover, this approach can help to counter ongoing assaults on CSO activity as foreign-led and to advance the legitimacy of CSO activity as home-grown.

In short, our recommendations are (1) to turn programming upside down, starting from the global South rather than the global North and (2) to think of Northern CSOs as part of relatively Southern-centred networks rather than as the leading organizations in linear North–South relations.

From these starting points, we propose that donors and Northern CSOs develop support for and collaboration with Southern CSOs working on a given issue while addressing a set of interrelated questions (elaborated below). These questions offer a framework for reshaping the terms of engagement between Northern and Southern actors by making Northern CSOs or donors part of a network rather than the central node or the top end of an ‘aid chain’. The questions conceive of support and collaboration as contributions to change processes rather than as stand-alone interventions.

### **1. How can we acknowledge and link up with existing civil society and what is already going on in a specific Southern context?**

To engage this question, Northern CSOs can seek to identify ongoing change processes pursued by Southern CSOs in a specific context to which they can make a meaningful contribution based on their own strengths at domestic and/or international levels. Collaboration can then be grounded in the acknowledgement of existing agendas, understandings, and self-defined support needs, as well as in an analysis of where these can be meaningfully

engaged. The selection of partners should then involve consideration of the extent to which these partners are locally grounded and have a capacity and will to engage their context strategically as agents in their own right—rather than their capacity to conform to a Northern CSO's programme requirements. Collaboration can involve individual Southern CSOs, but it is also important to engage with existing networks working on an issue in a Southern context. This can help to link up with advocacy processes in the South that are already underway in a doable fashion. It would also move advocacy programming away from an intervention orientation, making it more process-oriented and contextually embedded. Linking up in this way may require Northern CSOs to reconsider how much (and how) the 'universality' of their driving values can fit with Southern CSOs' diverse and particularistic understandings and forms of representation.

Donors can advance the acknowledgement of and linking up with existing civil society in Southern contexts by stimulating the creation of programmes in which Southern CSOs and their understandings, agendas, and support needs form important starting points. In addition to turning programming upside down, this would also mean asking more of Northern CSOs when it comes to their engagement with Southern contexts. Only Northern CSOs with deep awareness of CSO processes in Southern contexts would be in a position to develop the analyses required for engaging this question and the other questions raised in this framework.

This also raises questions for donors to address for themselves: To what extent are we driven by a specific development agenda vs. by an aim to strengthen civil society? How do these two agendas relate to each other for us, and how can they be reconciled? For example, human rights and marginality can be understood very differently by CSOs in different contexts. To illustrate: in India, caste marginalizes a substantial part of society, and many CSOs work on this issue. Taking Southern leadership as a starting point, donors can consider whether and how to acknowledge and support such differentiated understandings around fundamental starting points.

**2. How do different types of CSOs working on an issue complement each other? How can we relate to the diversity in the roles sought by these CSOs? What existing complementarities and ongoing networking could we add to or stimulate?**

CSOs in Southern contexts may engage in multiple collaborations beyond the 'aid chain'. Many of these are domestic in nature. Northern CSOs can explore how already existing CSO advocacy on an issue in a Southern context involves diverse civil society actors and complementarities among them. This involves answering fundamental questions regarding CSOs' contextualized agency: What, exactly, are the different CSOs working on an issue trying to achieve? From what understandings and with what capacities? Through what kinds of relating to the context and to other actors? What forms of support from the Northern side can best strengthen ongoing collective efforts? Northern CSOs can engage such questions with an openness to working with actors that are meaningfully contributing to change but that would not normally be considered eligible as partners. One can think here, for example, of social movements, platforms, or individuals. It is likely that engaging with existing networks in a Southern context would help to lead Northern CSOs to such actors and assist them in learning who matters for what reasons, as well as how the Northern CSOs could contribute.

From donors, this requires flexibility in their requirements regarding partnerships—the creation of funding programmes that allow for unconventional partners and programming. Although this may carry risk, it would facilitate engagement with social movements and other

(locally) highly relevant and legitimate forms of civil society organizing. The analysis of the relevance and legitimacy of different forms of civil society by network partners in a particular change process can help develop proper rationales and legitimation for support.

**3. What is the potential contribution of different CSOs in a (proposed) partnership to inclusive and sustainable development—what forms of inclusiveness are being pursued, and by what means? What potential do the CSOs have for addressing inequality and exclusion? What are their relative contributions to development, and how do these relate to each other?**

We found that different CSOs working in the same domain and holding apparently similar principles (such as inclusion) may advance inclusive and sustainable development to very different degrees and in very different respects. When exploring options for partnerships with Southern CSOs, Northern CSOs could research how specific CSOs are advocating for certain populations' voices or values. This would require close knowledge of the capacities and approaches taken by specific (potential) partners, as well as their added value in the CSO landscape in a certain context. This also involves exploring which voices in that constellation need support, for example to advance inclusion most effectively, and considering which voices are not weak only because of a lack of resources or capacity, but also because they are muted—marginalized to the degree that they are silenced—and in need of adjusted forms of support. In addition, it is good to consider that many Southern CSOs seeking to represent marginalized populations are staffed by relatively privileged people, and the extent to which collaborations advance the capacity of these populations to represent themselves requires attention. All this would also require a close understanding of the context in which CSOs operate.

Donors can ask of applicants to clarify exactly how proposed collaborations would advance inclusive and sustainable development in a certain context. This can help to do justice to the diversity of ways in which this can happen and give insight into partners' approaches and capacities. Donors can also ask for explanations of how chosen approaches and capacities match the possibilities of the specific contexts where the programme is to be carried out.

**4. Through which capacities, perspectives, resources, and strategies can Northern actors complement ongoing CSO efforts rooted in the global South, and vice versa?**

For Northern CSOs, this would mean building relations with Southern CSOs based on mutual respect and recognition and a developed and articulated understanding of specific CSOs and their efforts and contributions to development. It would also mean acknowledging how these efforts and contributions may diverge from one's own, exploring where agendas can meet, and uncovering how different approaches and strengths can complement each other. This would imply defining the relative roles of specific Northern and Southern partners in a change process. For Northern CSOs, this means showing their added value as Northern CSOs. This in no way marginalizes Northern CSOs; rather, it capitalizes on their power. It can help bring out and strengthen Northern CSOs' roles in new ways, highlighting and advancing the importance their specific capacities and contributions. These include e.g. mobilizing public opinion in the global North, raising funds, bringing in the international dimensions of issues, contributing technical expertise and services, engaging Northern institutions, convening, and brokering.

Donors can ask for engagement with questions around this kind of diversity and complementarity in applications: They can ask applicants to address self-identities, as well as the differentiated capacities and agendas of the Northern and Southern CSOs involved. They can also ask how this diversity is integrated into the programme and require articulation of the exact

nature of the complementarities. In case donors seek to partner with civil society in advocacy (as in the case of the Netherlands), they can seek to similarly choose to capitalize on differentiated strengths.

**5. How can we facilitate flexibility in the roles that CSOs may seek, navigating the possibilities of their contexts?**

Northern CSOs can develop their programmes in partnership with Southern CSOs, giving space to flexibility, as required for partners working in a specific context when it comes to roles, activities, and evolving collaborations, and budgeting accordingly. Changing conditions and the opportunities and barriers they present may also require enhanced communication and analysis of the strategic implications of developments.

Donors can facilitate and promote such flexibility in different ways. For example, they can allow for flexibility in programming that can be justified by the requirements of CSO advocacy in certain contexts. For example, donors can relativize the distinction between advocacy and service delivery, take into account the evolving patterns of collaboration, and facilitate support for informal organizing and action. Flexibility can also be facilitated when it comes to reporting requirements by considering the sensitivity of information or the limited reporting capacities of informal organizations. To meet accountability requirements, however, reporting can be strengthened in ways that justify this flexibility and show its rationale. This can be accomplished, for example, by working with newly emerging monitoring and evaluation approaches that seek to do justice to advocacy as a complex process of navigating possibilities and challenges.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, the approach proposed by Margit van Wessel and Wenny Ho in their 2018 publication, Narrative Assessment, available at <https://www.hivos.org/news/narrative-assessment-bringing-out-the-story-of-your-advocacy/>, or that put forward by Jim Coe and Rhonda Schlangen in their 2019 publication, No Royal Road, available at <https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/No-Royal-Road.pdf>.

## References

- Aarts, P., & Cavatorta, F. (2013). *Civil society in Syria and Iran: activism in authoritarian contexts*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Banks, N., Hulme, D., & Edwards, M. (2015). NGOs, states, and donors revisited: Still too close for comfort? In: *World Development*, 66, 707-718.
- Booth, J. A., & Richard, P. B. (1998). Civil society and political context in central America. In: *American Behavioral Scientist*, 42(1), 33-46.
- Coe, J. & Schlangen, R. (2019). *No royal road. Finding and following the natural pathways in advocacy evaluation*. Available at: [www.evaluationinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/No-Royal-Road.pdf](http://www.evaluationinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/No-Royal-Road.pdf)
- Contu, A., & Girei, E. (2014). NGOs management and the value of 'partnerships' for equality in international development: What's in a name? In: *Human Relations*, 67(2), 205-232.
- De Almagro, M. M. (2018). Lost boomerangs, the rebound effect and transnational advocacy networks: a discursive approach to norm diffusion. In: *Review of International Studies*, 44(4), 672-693.
- Dryzek, J. S., Downes, D., Hunold, C., Schlosberg, D., & Hernes, H. K. (2003). *Green states and social movements: environmentalism in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Norway*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Elbers, W. J. (2012). *The partnership paradox: principles and practice in North-South NGO relations*. PhD Thesis Radboud University.
- Flint, C., & Dezzani, R. (2018). State maneuver in the capitalist world-economy: A political geography of contextualized agency. In: *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 50(8), 1580-1601.
- Forsch, S. (2018). Moving to the global South: an analysis of the relocation of international NGO secretariats. In: *St Antony's International Review*, 13(2), 159-186.
- Fowler, A. (2016). Non-governmental development organisations' sustainability, partnership, and resourcing: futuristic reflections on a problematic triologue. In: *Development in Practice*, 26(5), 569-579.
- Gaventa, J. (2006). Finding the spaces for change: a power analysis. In: *IDS bulletin*, 37(6), 23-33.
- Gladius, M., Lewis, D., & Seckinelgin, H. (Eds.). (2004). *Exploring civil society: political and cultural contexts*. London: Routledge.
- Goodman, E. S. (2016). *Changing advocacy practices in a changing world: an evaluation of Oxfam America's influencing work in a shifting international NGO culture*. Available at: [digitalcollections.sit.edu/capstones/2884/](http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/capstones/2884/)
- Green, D. (2015). *Fit for the Future? Development trends and the role of international NGOs*. Oxford: Oxfam GB.
- Hilhorst, D. J. M. (2003). *The real world of NGOs: discourses, diversity and development*. London: Zed Books.
- Hossain, N., Khurana, N., Mohmand, S., Nazneen, S., Oosterom, M., Roberts, T., ... & Schröder, P. (2018). *What Does Closing Civic Space Mean for Development? A Literature Review and Proposed Conceptual Framework*. Brighton: IDS.
- Hunt, J. (2008). *Local NGOs in national development: the case of East Timor*. PhD thesis RMIT University
- Ismail, Z. (2019). *Advantages and value of funding NGOs in the global South*. K4D Helpdesk Report.
- Jalali, R. (2013). Financing Empowerment? How foreign aid to Southern NGOs and social movements undermines grass-roots mobilization. In: *Sociology Compass*, 7(1), 55-73.
- Jordan, L., & Van Tuijl, P. (2000). Political responsibility in transnational NGO advocacy. In: *World development*, 28(12), 2051-2065.



- Kamstra, J. (2017). *Dialogue and Dissent Theory of Change 2.0. Supporting civil society's advocacy role*. The Hague: Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Kamstra, J., Knippenberg, L., & Schulpen, L. (2013). Cut from a different cloth? Comparing democracy-promoting NGOs in Ghana and Indonesia. In: *Journal of Civil Society*, 9(1), 1-20.
- Kamstra, J., Pelzer, B., Elbers, W., & Ruben, R. (2016). Constraining is enabling? Exploring the influence of national context on civil society strength. In: *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 27(3), 1023-1044.
- Keck, M. E., & Sikkink, K. (2014). *Activists beyond borders: advocacy networks in international politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Kontinen, T., & Millstein, M. (2017). Rethinking civil society in development: scales and situated hegemonies. In: *Forum for Development Studies*, 44(1), 69-89.
- Lewis, D., & Opoku-Mensah, P. (2006). Moving forward research agendas on international NGOs: theory, agency and context. In: *Journal of International Development*, 18(5), 665-675.
- Marchetti, R. (Ed.). (2018). *Government-NGO relationships in Africa, Asia, Europe and MENA*. London: Routledge.
- Miller-Dawkins, M. (2017). *Understanding activism. How international NGOs, foundations, and others can provide better support to social movements*. Washington, DC: Rhize/Atlantic Council.
- Mitlin, D., Hickey, S., & Bebbington, A. (2007). Reclaiming development? NGOs and the challenge of alternatives. In: *World Development*, 35(10), 1699-1720.
- Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2018). *Investing in global prospects. For the World. For the Netherlands*. The Hague: Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Rossteutscher, S. (Ed.). (2005). *Democracy and the role of associations: Political, organizational and social contexts* (Vol. 38). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Sriskandarajah, D., & Tiwana, M. (2014). Towards a multipolar civil society. SUR-International In: *Journal on Human Rights*, 20, 511-517.
- Townsend, J. G., Porter, G., & Mawdsley, E. (2004). Creating spaces of resistance: development NGOs and their clients in Ghana, India and Mexico. In: *Antipode*, 36(5), 871-889.
- Van Wessel, M. & Ho, W. (2018). *Narrative Assessment: A new approach to advocacy monitoring, evaluation, learning and communication*. The Hague: Hivos.
- VeneKlasen, L., & Miller, V. (2002). Power and empowerment. In: *PLA Notes*, 43, 39-41.
- Walker, M. & Christie, K. (2015). *Where change happens: how international NGOs are shifting the focus of their advocacy & campaigning toward the Global South*. London: The Eden Stanley Group, Ltd.
- Walton, O. E., Davies, T., Thrandardottir, E., & Keating, V. C. (2016). Understanding contemporary challenges to INGO legitimacy: Integrating top-down and bottom-up perspectives. In: *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 27(6), 2764-2786.

## **Annex: CSOs included in the study**

For all seven studies, semi-structured interviews were the primary source of data. These data were supplemented by state policy documents, CSOs' internal documentation, websites, campaign materials, media reports and grey literature. In some cases, we also attended CSOs' internal meetings and workshops, and visited project implementation field sites.

Below, we provide further details about CSO and state actors we interviewed, categorized by theme (disaster risk reduction and the rights of marginalized sections of Indian society) and the three angles around which our research was organized (representation, collaboration, and state–civil society interactions).

### **Disaster risk reduction**

#### **Representation**

For the study on representation by CSOs working in disaster risk reduction, we selected Bihar and Gujarat, two states at extreme risk of multiple, distinct hazards. We conducted 36 semi-structured interviews with staff members (including directors, project managers, and community mobilizers) from 18 professional CSOs involved with disaster management, broadly conceived to include disaster prevention, enhancement of resilience, and reconstruction. The CSOs mostly work at state and regional level, with some working also at national level. The research focused on the way CSOs discursively construct their representative roles, with analysis focusing on the diversities between the constructions, and the ways constructions are embedded in wider relations and context.

We contacted some organizations on the basis of prior relations and also used snowball sampling. In order to shed light on the variety in representative roles CSOs construct, we had three criteria for selecting organizations. First, they had to be embedded in the local context and have multiple relations with groups commonly deemed vulnerable in that context (e.g. members of low castes, tribes, children, older people, women, and people with disabilities), and they had to define their work as addressing the vulnerability of societal groups. A second criterion was that they were engaged in one or more domains relevant to disaster management and that they classified their work as such and we ensured that our sample covered a range of domains. The selected organizations engage in water, sanitation, and hygiene; food and nutrition; housing; health care; education; natural resource-dependent livelihoods; social transformation; and equality. A third criterion was that the CSO sample should cover diverse capacities related to disaster management. Our sample included CSOs involved in search and rescue, relief distribution, social change, employing technical skills for infrastructural recovery and reconstruction, analysing and interpreting policies at multiple governance levels, documenting communities' knowledge, resource and community mobilization, working on constituents' priorities and improving services intended for them, generating awareness, and developing capacities.

#### **Collaboration**

The 11 CSOs included in the study on collaboration in the context of DRR were by and large part of consortium of professional CSOs working on DRR and related themes, within a collaborative framework. The CSOs work in different states across India and also at national level. We could access these CSOs as the consortium most of the CSOs were part of was in turn part of a larger, international collaboration of CSOs working on DRR advocacy. This collaboration is spread over different continents but officially led by a Netherlands-based alliance of CSOs, in

turn supported (mainly by a multi-million euro grant) by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

We conducted 33 interviews with staff members (directors, programme managers, project officers) working for these CSOs. These interviews focused on complementarity, asking about the actors who mattered in their work, their preferences for collaboration partners, the ways different types of CSOs complement each other, and the added value of different actors in a collaboration. We also examined the CSOs' internal documents and websites.

The research addressed collaboration within the consortium as well as outside of it, as many of the CSOs were, or had been, involved in many collaborations beyond the consortium. Analysis was focused on identifying the spectrum of complementarities interviewees identified as relevant to their work, and the way these relate to the wider international collaborations that the CSOs have been involved in.

The CSOs covered in our sample are diverse in terms of organizational backgrounds, and can be classified as humanitarian, faith-based, secular, technical, right-based, and development. In addition, they work at different levels, with some working at the grassroots, while other are active at state or national levels. In their focus, they also differ widely. The sample included: the Indian chapter of an international humanitarian Christian organization working on e.g. community managed disaster risk reduction; a Catholic development organization that funds community-level DRR projects including capacity development; a global technical organization working on environmental and natural resource management; a network of small, informal and unregistered grassroots CSOs working from a local environmental development perspective; a state-level technical CSOS working on ecosystem restoration and management; a state-level rights-based organization working on empowerment; a national-level technical-cum environmental CSO working on sustainable people-centred solutions and innovations; a state-level rights-based and humanitarian CSO working on advancing community needs in disaster management programs; the Indian chapter of an international Catholic development CSOS working on resilience through an integrated approach to DRR and funding grassroots CSOs; and international technical knowledge-producing environmental CSO; a Dalit grassroots, rights-based CSOs focused on the empowerment and inclusion of Dalits. In the context of disaster, they specialise in relief and recovery.

### **State–civil society interactions**

The study on state–civil society interactions focused on relations between state disaster management agencies and CSOs that are involved with these agencies in collaborative relations. In total, 42 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Analysis focused on identifying patterns in the data concerning the roles state agencies assign to CSOs, the criteria state agencies maintain for selecting CSOs to work with, the roles CSOs take up and the ways CSOs navigate the roles that the state offers them.

Fieldwork was conducted in the two disaster-prone states of Gujarat and Bihar and in Delhi. In each state, we interviewed staff members of two key state-level government agencies involved with DRR (Bihar: the Bihar State Disaster Management Authority and the Disaster Management Department; Gujarat: the Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority and the Gujarat Institute of Disaster Management). In addition, we interviewed staff members of two key national-level authorities in Delhi involved in disaster management (the National Disaster Management Authority and the National Institute of Disaster Management). When it comes to the CSOs: we interviewed staff members from four Indian CSOs and three international NGOs

currently working with government agencies involved with disaster management at the national, state and/or district level. The CSOs are engaged in a wide range of activities more or less explicitly concerned with DRR and disaster management more broadly, which again are often part of a broader portfolio of activities, such as: community-driven DRR, natural resource management; rights-based approaches to advancement of marginal sections of Indian society such as migrant workers; school safety, disaster preparedness, technical services; human trafficking; children's rights.

For deepening insight, we also interviewed staff of a consultancy agency, two intergovernmental agencies, and the secretariat of a national-level platform bringing together governmental and non-governmental actors working on DRR. Finally, interviews were conducted with two former government employees who had been part of a State Disaster Management Authority and the National Disaster Management Authority and who had worked extensively in DRR collaborations with different agencies and stakeholders.

## **Rights of marginalized sections of Indian society**

### **Collaboration**

For the study on autonomy and capacity development, fieldwork was conducted in the state of Jharkhand, where a professional Delhi-based CSO working on women's rights had been working on capacity development of women elected representatives through seven Jharkhand-based partner CSOs. These seven partner organizations can be classified as CBOs (community-based organizations), mostly working at district or state level in Jharkhand, all of which work with hired staff as well as volunteers. These CBOs are involved in a range of activities including capacity development, advocacy, mobilization and micro-credit. Our data consist of 60 in-depth interviews with women involved with the program including: 1) staff members of the Delhi-based CSO, 2) women heads of the seven local partners, 3) staff facilitators of local partners directly trained for the program, 4) elected women representatives trained directly by the Delhi-based CSO and connected to the local partner in each district. The fieldwork was exploratory in nature, seeking to understand the experiences, interpretations and contexts of participants, which in turn allowed us to learn what autonomy meant for them and what the dynamic between capacity development and autonomy was within the collaborations between those involved.

For the study on the sex workers network, we conducted semi-structured interviews with staff of the secretariat of the national network, staff of five of the 16 member CBOs of the network. These CBOs are spread across India. Those involved in our study are located in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra. A staff member of a Netherlands-based CSO supporting the network was interviewed as well. In total, 12 interviews were conducted. The research (still underway) focuses on the different roles that CSOs construct for themselves and others within the network, in particular in forms of representation. We analyze mutual learning and collective strategizing building complementary roles. We are interested especially in the ways in which, within a CSO collaboration, power-sensitive ways of relating can help to represent without violating claims and creating a sense of mutual understanding between different CSOs involved in constructing the representation.

### **Representation**

The study on the ways CSOs construct their roles representing marginalized sections of society was carried out in Jharkhand. We carried out 30 interviews with the staff/leadership of 12 CSOs as well as individual activists involved with different CSOs. The research (still underway) focuses on the way CSOs discursively construct their representative roles, with analysis focusing on the

diversities between the constructions, and the ways constructions are embedded in wider relations and context. To capture diversity in representative roles, we included formally organized, professional CSOs, social movements, and grassroots organizations (in the sense of having long-term ties with local communities, and run by staff and volunteers from the area). We included organizations working at different levels: chapters of national CSOs as well as CSOs working within Jharkhand, often operating in a number of districts. The organizations commonly address different and overlapping forms of social, economic and political marginalization connected with caste, gender, ethnicity, and age; working with children, women, tribal communities, muslims and scheduled caste communities. Representation often means performing the role of an intermediary between constituencies and the state—connecting marginalized groups and the state, raising people’s awareness of entitlements, articulating issues and needs, and translating between marginalized groups and the state. Issues that the CSOs work on performing such roles are, for example: legal advocacy countering violence against women; empowerment of muslim women or girls from scheduled caste communities; advocacy for the right to food; financial inclusion and entitlements; advocacy for the rights of poor tribal communities.

### **State–civil society interactions**

For the study on state–civil society interactions around the rights of marginalized sections of Indian society, we conducted 50 semi-structured interviews with state and civil society actors. The research (still underway) focuses on the way state and civil society approached and shaped the space for civil society advocacy on the rights of marginalized sections of Indian society in interaction with each other. In particular we studied the different ways state actors often constrict, and CSO actors seek to navigate and re-open space through their strategizing. Partly, interviews were conducted with politicians and civil servants at national level and in the state of Jharkhand: state-level ministers; high-ranking civil servants and retired civil servants at national and state (including district) level, members of national parliament; and staff of government agencies at national and state levels. For another part, interviews took place with civil society actors of different kinds: leadership of CSO networks; staff of national-level and state-level CSOs; staff of a government-controlled CSO; individual activists. The interviewees from the state were or had been involved with diverse policy themes pertinent to the rights of marginalized sections of Indian society such as food, gender, child development, rural development, tribal welfare and human trafficking. The interviewees from civil society work on rights-centred issues such as rights of socially excluded children and youth, women’s rights, food security, livelihood rights, Dalit rights, forest rights and human trafficking.





