

Implementation of the Nordic+ conclusions on civil society support: The case of Zambia

Karin Fällman

The Nordic+ initiative originated as an effort by six like-minded donors to improve their civil society support in line with the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2006). In 2007, the donors – ie the official donor agencies of Norway, Finland, Sweden, Ireland, Canada and Great Britain – commissioned a study of their civil society support in six countries.¹ The management response became known as the Nordic+ conclusions (Scanteam 2007). This one-pager of findings and guidelines was endorsed by a majority of the donor agencies' Director Generals in February 2008 and later tested in three pilot countries; Zambia, Mozambique and Ghana.

Zambia's pilot implementation is the topic of this article. In Zambia, the implementation of the Nordic+ conclusions focused on the recommendation to increase core/program support, joint funding and support via intermediary (sub-granting) organisations. As coordinator in Zambia, the Embassy of Sweden promoted knowledge sharing, donor harmonisation and work in line with the aid effectiveness principles primarily through the Non-State Actor Group (NSAG) and in the donor group supporting the Zambian Governance Foundation.²

The Nordic+ guidelines were already reflected in civil society support in Zambia at the time of testing the Nordic+ conclusions. Core/programme funding was frequently granted; the use of intermediaries was on the rise; and joint funding models were increasingly common. The latter presupposes increased donor coordination and the use of aid effectiveness principles. However, the move towards joint support, core funding and support via intermediaries was not directed by joint steering documents. There had been discussions in the NSAG about developing

country specific guidelines, but the members were cautious, pointing to the danger of joint guidelines limiting civil society support, and making it riskier by encouraging the use of a few funding modalities only.

Thus the development towards more joint support, core funding and support via intermediaries was widely debated in Zambia. The assumption in the Nordic+ study that this trend was donor driven and caused by donors' need to slim down the administration of CSO support, was frequently echoed in Zambia, especially by CSOs. Another criticism often voiced – also by donors – was that core funding, and in particular core funding via intermediaries, only benefitted large, well-connected and professional organisations and, therefore, streamlined CSOs. To get a better understanding of how the common support models performed in terms of aid effectiveness and to complement the Nordic+ report with renewed data and additional information, the Embassy of Sweden initiated the following survey among selected donors and partner organisations (Embassy of Sweden 2010).

Methodology

This survey is quantitative and offers an overview of the rating of different support models and funding modalities in relation to ten principles that are part of the Nordic+ and Paris doctrines or closely connected to them.³ Respondents are actors which at the time were involved in civil society support in Zambia, either as donor or CSO representatives. Thus the sample follows the design of the Nordic+ study and is skewed to already known and active partners.

The respondents can be divided into two groups: leading *official donors* in the NSAG, and *civil society organisations*. The latter is sub-grouped into Lusaka-based National CSOs (NCSOs) and International CSOs (ICSOs) present in Zambia. The initially small scale survey quickly grew with the assistance of the Swedish NGO Forum Syd in Lusaka, whose coordinator distributed the questionnaire to different CSOs, increasing the number of respondents.

Altogether 54 respondents were asked to participate in the survey (12 official donors; and 42 CSOs, out of them 29 NCSOs and 13 ICSOs). Within the survey period, nine official donors, nine national NCSOs, and

four ICSOs provided their answers.⁴ The response rate for official donors was high, 75 percent, and should be perceived as adequate. However, the non-responses from CSOs were unsatisfactory; approximately 30 percent of aggregated and disaggregated CSO respondents provided answers. This should be considered when analysing the data.

Among the non-responding actors, national CSOs seem to be overrepresented – most probably, but not certainly, choosing not to participate in the survey due to lack of time. Non-responses may also stem from inadequate information of the purpose and use of the survey, which would explain why official donors in the Non-State Actor Group responded satisfactorily – having had more insight in the study process. Another problem with the respondents is the bias of the different sub-groups in absolute numbers, weighting the international CSOs disproportionately heavy. It is therefore important to note that the *aggregated scores do not reflect the different respondents equally*, thus the need to disaggregate the scores and highlight evident differences between official donors, NCSOs and ICSOs.⁵ Furthermore, two of the four ICSOs originate in Sweden which may have biased the results – assuming a risk of homogeneity among 50 percent of the responding ICSOs with regard to values, perceptions and preferences when it comes to civil society support.

As already pointed out only official donors, NCSOs and ICSOs were invited to participate in the survey. This is a weakness, since other relevant stakeholders, such as non-CSO intermediaries, recipients of the assistance, and rural-, grassroots-, or not yet well-established CSOs are left out. A suggestion for future surveys on the topic is to expand the scope and include a wider group of recipients – reflecting the relevant stakeholders more thoroughly.

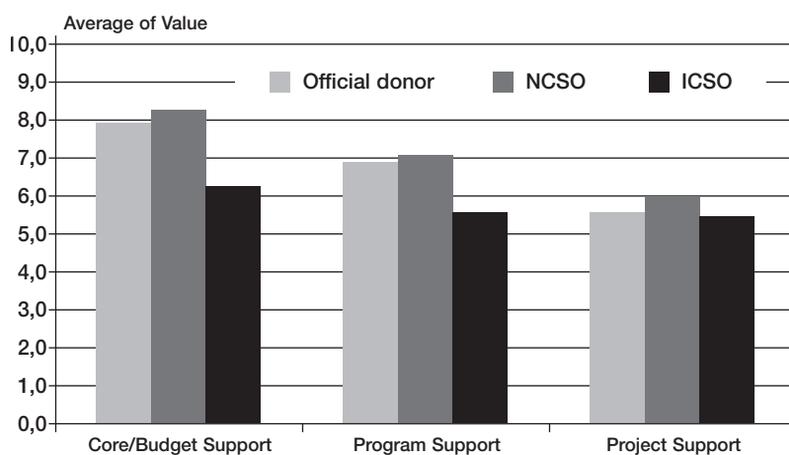
Respondents were asked to rate the performance of eight support models in relation to the ten principles. They were also asked to rate how core, program, and project support perform in relation to the same principles. Answers were provided using a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 represented poor, 5 satisfactory and 10 excellent. The data was analysed in a pivot table to illustrate the multidimensional aspects of the data. Charts of the different respondents' ratings of the modalities, as well as tables

with the total average were then created to better illustrate the findings. The complete data is presented in appendices (Embassy of Sweden 2010).

Results

Funding modalities

Table 1. Respondents rating core-, program-, and project support in relation to the *Paris principles overall*.



The Zambia study supports the Nordic+ guidelines in so far as to identify *core funding* as the most popular funding modality (Table1). Many of the donors have policies promoting this kind of support, and the CSO respondents belong to the group of well-established organisations that are likely to qualify for core support; hence this strong preference is not surprising. The core funding modality is in total the strongest performer in relation to all principles. Not unexpectedly, it scores particularly high on *alignment to end recipient CSO systems* (8.6), *ownership* (8.2) and *donor coordination* (8.2). More surprising is that core funding is also rated exceptionally high in relation to *outreach* (8.2). While many would argue that core funding cannot provide a large outreach, as only well established

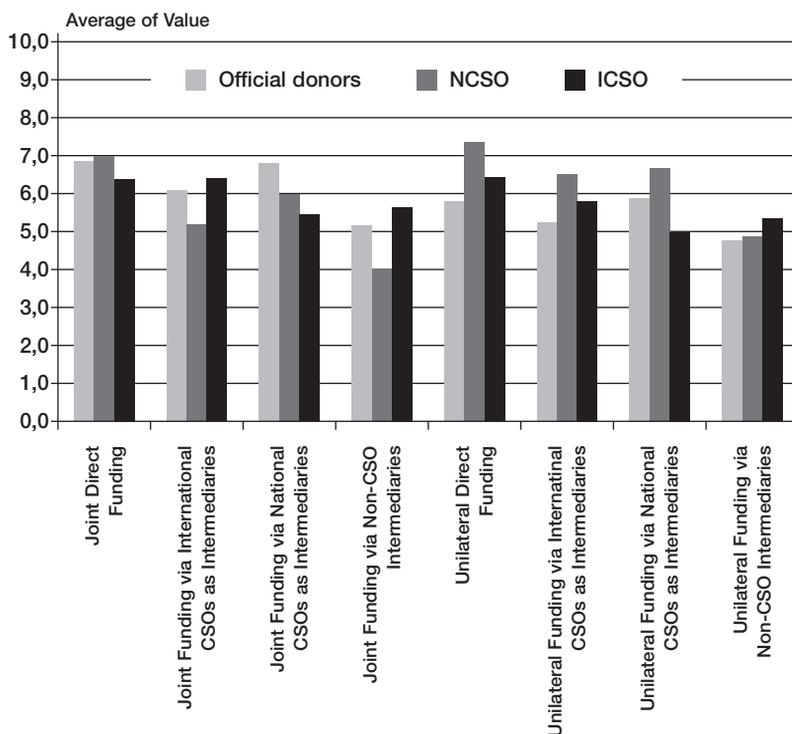
CSOs have access to it, the explanation for the high scores may be that core funding encourages capacity building rather than short term results and therefore may *give larger outreach in a long term perspective*.

Program funding is the second preference in all but one category – *mutual accountability between intermediaries and donors* – where it performs equally well as core funding (8.0). Program support is also rated as relatively good at providing *outreach* (7.4) but weak in relation to *dialogue between CSOs, donors and other stakeholders* (6.1).

It is difficult to interpret the high scores for mutual accountability between intermediaries and donors on the one hand, and relatively poor dialogue between CSOs, donors and other stakeholders on the other. Perhaps program support is only well understood and transparent for those directly involved – recipient CSOs, intermediaries and donors – while for outsiders who dialogue with these actors, the program support level may be difficult to comprehend and perhaps not seen as very relevant to talk about, as compared to a dialogue related to core support, where the topic is a specific organisation and its strategy.

Project support is the least popular funding modality with particularly low scores in relation to *donor coordination* (4.7), *dialogue between CSOs, donors and stakeholders* (5.1) and *alignment to end recipient CSOs' systems* (5.3). This funding modality's highest scores, and thus its *relative strength*, are related to its ability to promote *transparency* (6.6), *outreach* (6.4) and *results* (6.4). One reason may be that project support is more hands-on, with well-defined objectives making it more transparent and allowing it to produce tangible results. Moreover, project support can benefit also small and/or fragile CSOs and Community-Based Organisations (CBOs); hence it may indeed provide a large outreach.

Altogether, CSOs – and especially national CSOs – are more supportive of project funding than are the donors. A possible explanation is that responding CSOs often function as intermediaries and, as such, they are likely to have recent, positive experiences from working with project support. Donors, on the other hand, are themselves working less and less with project support; hence their experiences may be outdated. They may also rate project support low to justify their move towards core support.

*Unilateral support and joint support*Table 2. Respondents rating different joint and unilateral support models in relation to the *Paris principles*.

The second component of the Zambia survey sorts out preferences between *joint*, *unilateral*, *direct* and *indirect* support models. To start with, when comparing preferences between unilateral and joint support models, donors clearly prefer joint support, and NCSOs unilateral. ICOSOs have no such clear partiality. NCSOs' strong support for unilateral funding nevertheless makes CSOs as a group favour this model (Table 2). Donors' choice of the joint support model confirms Scanteam's and others' conclusions that *the development towards joint funding is donor driven* and probably explained by donors' desire to work in a coordinated manner in line with the Paris Declaration, and to slim down the administration of civil society support.

The reason behind NCSO preference for unilateral support may be found in the high scores this model gets for promoting results, dialogue, ownership and alignment. As pointed out by Scanteam and by many NCSOs, *unilateral funding tends to create stronger, strategic and more equal partnerships between donors and NCSOs*, which in turn gives better dialogue, enables alignment and creates stronger ownership. This is particularly true when unilateral and joint support is direct and the chain of actors the shortest possible, thus strengthening the position of the end recipient CSOs. Direct and indirect support will be further discussed in sections below.

In the Scanteam study, NCSOs raised concerns about donor coordination and donors' move towards joint support models, as they feared that conflicts with one donor would risk the support of all. Such concerns appear to be supported by the Zambia survey with its preference for unilateral support, and this model's particularly high scores in relation to ownership, alignment and dialogue. These findings point to a valid risk that donor coordination poses to CSO independence, similar to the fear expressed by the Government that the balance in relations and bargaining power might become skewed, as donors "gang up."

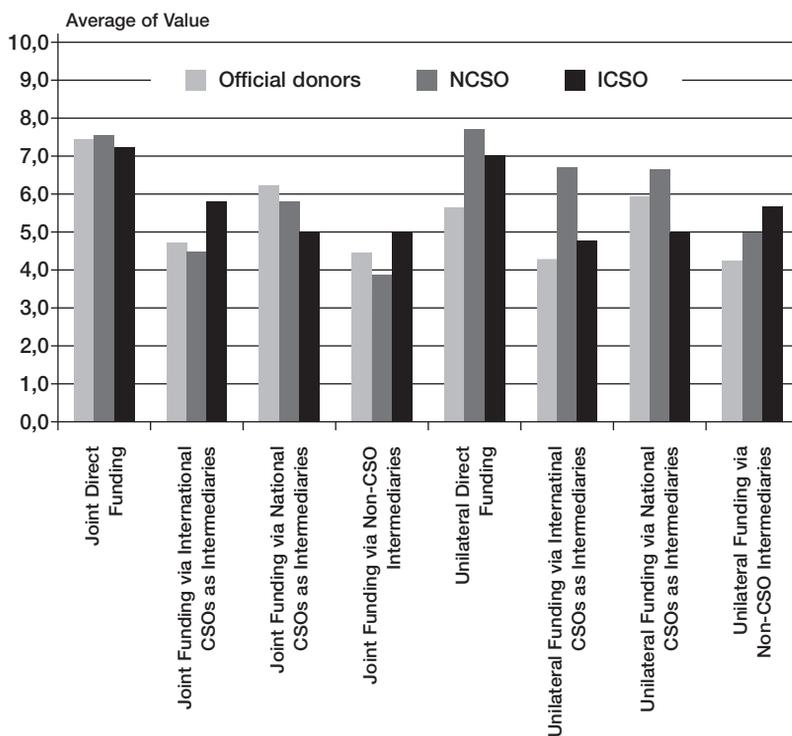
The fact that ICSOs are less negative towards joint support may have to do with their often stronger links to donors, especially donors from their country of origin. Moreover, the responding ICSOs tend to think that all support models perform rather equal when it comes to dialogue with donors, perhaps because ICSOs are not as financially dependent on the group of donors who support them in Zambia as are the NCSOs.

Direct and indirect support

Another support model recommended by the Nordic+ guidelines is indirect support, ie funding via intermediaries. However, *if there is one clear preference in the Zambia survey besides that for core funding, it is for direct support*. Although CSOs want the direct funding to be provided by one donor at a time, the unilateral model receives a lower total average (6.5) than joint direct funding (6.8) which is the single most popular model, much due to donors' strong support for joint funding. Unilateral direct funding scores an average of 6.5 in relation to all principles, with the

not very surprising exceptions of *dialogue between CSOs, donors and other stakeholders* (6.3) *outreach* (6.2) and *donor coordination* (5.0).

Table 3. Respondents rating different support models in relation to *alignment*.



In relation to unilateral direct support, it is interesting to note that *donors think they are less aligned to CSOs' agendas as sole financiers* than what CSOs themselves think (Table 3). The responding donors and NCSOs further perceive funding through non-CSOs intermediaries as impeding the alignment, rating it below satisfactory in this regard.

The dissatisfactory alignment of joint and/or indirect support might be explained by the quality of *dialogue* between CSO and donor when working with different support models. In the Scanteam report, CSOs were concerned that harmonisation was impeding a constructive dialogue with donors, and claimed it was rather creating a forum for donor

monologue, where CSO priorities were neglected. The Zambia survey strengthens these findings, with CSOs rating dialogue in unilateral funding much higher than do the donors. The same pattern can be discerned for the closely related *mutual accountability*. Here as well, CSO respondents have a more positive view of the performance of unilateral direct support models than do donors.

Indirect support via CSO intermediaries

When working with indirect support models, it is important to choose “the right intermediary.” Most popular in the Zambia survey are the NCSOs. Non-CSOs are the least preferred, scoring 4.6 and 4.9 in total, thereby falling below what is considered satisfactory. Non-CSO intermediaries will be discussed more in-depth in the section below.

When the results are disaggregated, ICSOs and NCSOs alike rate themselves as the best intermediaries. The analysis of how various intermediaries perform should take this pattern of auto-rating into account, as NCSOs tend to give themselves slightly lower scores than what the ICSOs do. Additionally, NCSOs are more generous when rating their ICSO colleagues than the other way around.

In the survey, *NCSOs confirm their reputation as the intermediary who caters for strong ownership and alignment to end recipient CSOs’ system*. Donors even rate NCSOs as more aligned than do the NCSOs themselves. They are also considered better at promoting *outreach*, making this model score slightly better here than the favoured direct funding. An interesting observation is that ICSOs only agree that NCSOs are strong promoters of outreach when funding is provided jointly, indicating that ICSOs finds bilateral cooperation between NCSOs and donors relatively closed. One explanation may lie in the strong, strategic partnerships that are prone to develop in a bilateral cooperation, as indicated by both Scanteam and survey respondents. These partnerships are important for exchange of strategic information and for mutual moral and political support. This, in turn, would indicate that the dialogue is close and sometimes confidential and, also in part exclusive, hence perceived as closed.

Because of strong donor support, NCSOs also rank as the top intermediary in relation to *donor coordination and harmonisation*. The NCSOs

themselves, however, think that ICSOs are better. Perhaps this is so because ICSOs are considered more closely connected to donors and therefore better positioned to promote donor coordination.

NCSOs are also top rated in total in relation to *dialogue* between CSOs, donors and other stakeholders, and to *mutual accountability* between end recipient CSOs and donors. However, ICSOs score equally high on promoting mutual accountability between intermediaries and donors. This is quite remarkable given that NCSOs are frequently voiced as the intermediaries who are closest to the end recipient CSOs. *Thus NCSOs appear good at promoting dialogue and mutual accountability between donors and end recipient CSOs, but less successful in promoting mutual accountability between themselves as intermediaries and their CSO partners.*

ICSO intermediaries also receive the highest scores in relation to *transparency*, thanks to the strong support they receive from their NCSO colleagues. Donors on the other hand have rated NCSOs as the most transparent intermediaries, at least when funding is joint. However, donors give NCSOs a notably lower transparency score when funding is unilateral. One possible reason is that joint funding demands greater transparency, while unilateral funding via NCSOs is seen by donors and ICSOs alike as a relatively closed cooperation.

Finally, ICSOs perform slightly better than NCSOs as intermediaries in relation to *development results*. Donors make little difference between how ICSOs and NCSOs produce results when working as intermediaries, but the CSOs themselves make a clear distinction, in both cases in favour of themselves.

Indirect support via non-CSO intermediaries

The one intermediary that clearly stands out as the least preferred is the non-CSO intermediary. The weak support for non-CSOs in total (4.8) is striking and puts this intermediary *below the level of satisfactory*. In Zambia, the model has primarily been used with UN agencies and consultancy companies – the best known example of the latter probably being the Zambia Elections Fund of 2006. Since most arguments for working with intermediaries derive from the Paris Declaration on Aid

Effectiveness, it is interesting to see that this intermediary receives its lowest scores, when support is *provided in line with the aid effectiveness agenda, ie coordinated by a group of donors*, as compared to unilaterally, by one donor.

When funding is unilateral, the performance of non-CSO intermediaries is less than satisfactory in relation to *alignment* (4.9), *donor coordination and harmonisation* (4.3), *outreach* (4.6), *ownership* (4.8), *results* (4.8) and *mutual accountability between end recipient CSOs and donors* (4.8). Here, all responding sub-groups seem to agree in their rating, with reservation for marginal variations. When funding is joint, however, only *dialogue* (5.5), *donor coordination and harmonisation* (5.1), and *mutual accountability between intermediary and donor* (5.1) are rated above satisfactory, and then only marginally above. Given that most of the support via non-CSO intermediaries has been provided jointly in Zambia, these results are quite disappointing. Further assessment of this model is therefore encouraged.

NCSOs are the most critical towards this model, whereas ICSOs have the least negative attitude. Donors are not very content with the model either but assess it as slightly above satisfactory when funding is joint. Scanteam suggests that one reason for the low rating is non-CSOs' lack of credibility in relation to the CSO community. And indeed, NCSOs in Zambia have criticised the non-CSO intermediaries using credibility-related arguments: non-CSOs have less knowledge about the CSO sector; they work with economic profit objectives and therefore have a different and less popular aim; and they are less rooted among CSOs and CBOs in the provinces and at grassroots levels.

The relatively positive attitude of ICSOs towards non-CSOs might be explained by similarities in functions and working methods. Both types of organisation often work as sub-granting organisations, supporting NCSO partners in the implementation of their agendas.

It is surprising that *donors are negative towards support via non-CSO intermediaries*. Given the recent establishment of the *Zambian Governance Foundation* – managed by a consultancy company – and donors' positive evaluations of the jointly supported *Election Fund* – also run by a company – it is remarkable that donors rate non-CSOs as weak perfor-

mers. Not even in relation to *development results* and *outreach*, which are common arguments for a professional company as an intermediary, does this model get significant support. The *relatively* high scores the model receives for *donor coordination* may explain why it is used, despite its generally meagre performance.

However, when analysing the low scores for non-CSO intermediaries, it is important to remember that the Zambia survey followed the example of the Nordic+ study, carried out by the consultancy company Scanteam, and did not ask for the opinions of the non-CSO intermediaries themselves. Nor were rural, grassroots and new CSOs/CBOs with limited access to donor funding asked, organisations that might have been more open to alternative intermediaries who could increase their access to funding.

One recent attempt to reach CSOs and CBOs that do not usually access donor funding is the Zambian Governance Foundation (ZGF), which offers a variety of funding modalities. It reaches all levels of CSOs/CBOs by providing funding for projects and capacity building, even though core funding is the preferred modality. This should enable the ZGF to align with end recipient CSOs' systems and promote strong ownership. To ensure the latter, the ZGF is also managed by a Zambian board of "prominent, but independent" individuals. Finally, monitoring and evaluation, knowledge sharing and joint learning are all part of the results focus of the ZGF. However, since funds had not yet been disbursed at the time of the survey, the possible impact of this model will have to be evaluated and compared to other indirect models at a later stage.

Conclusions and way forward

The favoured support models in the Nordic+ conclusions – core support, indirect support and joint support – are not necessarily the ones performing the best according to the twenty-two CSOs and donors who participated in the survey in Zambia.

Core funding is the one Nordic+ model that is strongly supported by all respondents, and it scores particularly high on alignment, ownership, donor coordination and outreach. The second preference, program support, has its strengths in the mutual accountability between interme-

diaries and donors and in outreach. The least preferred modality, project support, is relatively strong in relation to transparency, development results and outreach.

CSOs, and particularly NCSOs, prefer unilateral funding; only donors favour joint support models. According to NCSOs, donors are more aligned and open to mutual accountability in unilateral arrangements than the donors themselves think they are. Unilateral funding also scores particularly high in relation to ownership, alignment, dialogue and development results. If funding is to be joint, CSOs prefer it to be direct.

Thus, direct support is considered better than support through intermediaries. CSOs, and particularly NCSOs, favour unilateral direct funding, while donors prefer joint direct funding. When working with indirect support, NCSOs are the most popular intermediaries, followed by ICSOs, and with non-CSOs falling far behind the two. Funding via NCSOs is considered to promote ownership, alignment, outreach and mutual accountability between CSOs and donors, whereas support via ICSOs score high on transparency and mutual accountability between both intermediaries and CSOs, and intermediaries and donors. Moreover, ICSOs are considered the best intermediaries at producing development results, although only slightly better than NCSOs. Non-CSOs, on the contrary, are seen as weak performers and have an average score below the level of satisfactory.

It is important to remember that these results should be seen in the light of the methodological limitations and the scope of the study – the survey's respondents being well connected CSOs and official donors, and the aggravating fact of a strong tendency to “auto-rating” by the respondents. Had the survey also asked for the opinions of non-CSO intermediaries and rural, grassroots and new CSOs/CBOs with limited access to donor funding, the models may well have scored differently – and particularly so if the recently established Zambian Governance Foundation, which addresses many of the model's weaknesses, had been operational before the survey.

In sum, the support models developed in line with the Nordic+ and Paris principles may be less successful at promoting ownership, alignment, mutual accountability, transparency, harmonisation, outreach and

development results than expected, and less successful than old fashioned models such as unilateral direct funding.

An important conclusion is that the *type of respondent* seems to be a much stronger determinant when it comes to scores for each support model than is the choice of variable within each model. For instance, when focussing on NCSOs' assessment of each funding model, almost invariably joint funding via non-CSO intermediaries scores the lowest, and unilateral direct funding scores the highest, regardless of which Paris principle one looks at. Similarly, donors' assessments (or that of ICSOs) of the same support models and Paris principles will often vary from those provided by the NCSOs, but will again be strikingly consistent internally, regardless of which Paris principle is the object of the assessment.

So, tell me your choice of support model and I will tell you who you are! If you prefer direct, unilateral support, you almost certainly belong to a well-established, national civil society organisation. If you have no obvious preference between joint and unilateral support or between direct and indirect funding models, you probably represent international civil society. But, if you clearly favour joint funding (and do not mind working via intermediaries), you are likely to be a donor. The Nordic+ support models of joint and indirect support seem to correspond primarily to donors' preferences and to some degree to the likings of ICSOs. *Looking at how preferences follow the practitioner type, the Nordic+ should probably have agreed on a variety of support models instead of searching for one or two models that fit all.*

A lesson for future CSO support is the understanding that there are numerous support models with ideal features – and which is the favourite depends on the type of respondent. Therefore, the end recipient CSO should be the starting point for selecting funding modalities. Moreover, for future survey, given the importance of the practitioner type, it is crucial to include also community based organisations, new and less well-connected CSOs as respondents. Finally, for future studies it is suggested to link the preferred support models to development results, to find out not only which support models are favoured but also which models are best at producing development results.

Notes

1. The study was carried out in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Zambia and by the consultancy company Scanteam (Scanteam 2007).
2. The Zambian Governance Foundation was a new support model at the time, developed in line with the Nordic+ conclusions to strengthen core/program support, joint funding and support via intermediaries (sub-granting) organisations
3. The support models were unilateral direct funding; joint direct funding; unilateral funding via national CSOs as intermediaries; unilateral funding via international CSOs as intermediaries; unilateral funding via non-CSO intermediaries; joint funding via national CSOs as intermediaries; joint funding via international CSOs as intermediaries; and joint funding via non-CSO intermediaries. The principles were 1) results/fulfilment of program/project objectives, 2) transparency, 3) mutual accountability between end recipient CSOs and intermediaries, 4) mutual accountability between end recipient CSOs and donors, 5) mutual accountability between intermediaries and donors, 6) ownership of end recipient CSOs, 7) alignment to end recipient CSOs' systems, 8) outreach, 9) dialogue between CSOs, donors and other stakeholders, and 10) donor coordination/harmonisation.
4. See Appendix 1, Responding Agents, in Embassy of Sweden 2010.
5. All aggregated and disaggregated data are found in appendices in Embassy of Sweden 2010, Appendix 2 illustrating Funding modalities in relation to the Paris principles; Appendix 3 illustrating Support models in relation to the principles; and Appendix 4 displaying aggregated scores for different modalities in relation to the principles.
6. NCSOs ranking themselves as 6.3 (5.9) on total average when joint funding is provided, and 7.4 (7.0) when unilateral funding is provided; ICSOs ranking themselves as 7.3 (4.8) in total when joint funding is provided and 7.5 (4.8) when unilateral. The average score respective respondent gives their counterparts are seen within brackets. It is interesting also to note how NCSOs perceive themselves as far better performers when receiving unilateral funding.

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Author affiliation

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