

# Assessing a Potential CSO Partner

## Identifying and Assessing Potential CSO Cooperation Partners

The manner in which ADB works with a CSO depends on the type of CSO concerned, and the specific type of cooperation under consideration. Cooperation with CSOs is also affected by country-specific circumstances. Of particular concern in this regard is the attitude of the government toward CSOs, the number of CSOs that exist in the country, and the type of services they may potentially provide. As CSOs comprise a wide range of formal and informal organizations in civil society, their respective capacities, degrees of expertise, and scopes of operation also vary widely.

Some countries have well-established regulatory frameworks conducive to CSO activities (India, Philippines), while others do not (Myanmar, Turkmenistan). In countries in which there is a large donor presence, aid inflows often create an environment that supports numerous large-scale international NGOs (Nepal, Viet Nam). Differing cultural, legal, political, and social traditions must also be taken into account in assessing CSOs as potential cooperation partners, since such factors can in some cases have a significant impact on CSO operations.

Assessing CSOs as potential cooperation partners is often best accomplished on either a sector or geographic basis. This generally facilitates development of a specific and limiting set of criteria for assessing CSOs as cooperation partners. Such specific criteria generally engender trust, credibility, and an effective working relationship with government and other major stakeholders. Good practice relating to cooperation with CSOs requires that evaluation criteria be applied objectively, fairly, and transparently. Whenever possible, assessments of CSOs should be based on proven performance rather than on mission statements or unsubstantiated information.

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The expertise of more than 200 representatives of government and civil society enriched the country gender assessment for the Philippines

Many countries have sector CSO networks or a nationally-based CSO apex organization. Links to these organizations can be found on ADB's website at [www.adb.org/ngos/cso-sources.asp](http://www.adb.org/ngos/cso-sources.asp). It often is useful to involve such networks or apex organizations when identifying or assessing CSOs as potential cooperation partners. Networks or apex organizations that apply codes of conduct and other measures of accountability to member organizations are often the most helpful. This notwithstanding, qualified CSOs should not be excluded simply because they are not members of an apex organization or network.

Resident missions can also greatly help identify and assess CSOs as potential cooperation partners due to their often intimate knowledge of national CSO communities and individual CSOs. Resident missions are also often a primary source of information regarding other country-specific aspects of working with CSOs, including relevant government procedures.

The NGOC maintains a database of ADB's main CSO interlocutors. This database, NGOLink, can be accessed by staff members via ADB's intranet.<sup>13</sup>

### **Questionnaire for Use in Assessing Potential CSO Partners**

A detailed questionnaire completed by the potential CSO cooperation partner is often a powerful tool in determining whether or not a particular CSO is appropriate as an ADB partner organization. For this reason, a prototype questionnaire appears directly below. While such a prototype provides valuable insights into the CSO selection and assessment process, it is by no means intended as a one-size-fits-all tool for assessing a potential partner. Neither does there exist a particular "passing grade" for the completed questionnaire. Instead, project officers themselves must judge on the basis of the cooperation envisioned, whether or not the responses to the questionnaire engender sufficient confidence that the CSO will be

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<sup>13</sup> NGOLink: [//cop.asiandevbank.org:8030/ngo/goto/home](http://cop.asiandevbank.org:8030/ngo/goto/home)

a reliable partner. Ultimately, the question that must be answered is whether or not the CSO under consideration is able to fulfil the responsibilities required of it under the particular ADB-assisted activity in question.

Prior to using this questionnaire (or one similar to it) as an assessment tool, the responsible project officer should have operationally delineated the type and extent of the work expected of the CSO, the specific objectives of the partnership, and the opportunities and risks associated with collaborating with the CSO concerned in the context of the project or initiative in question.

The major strength of the prototype questionnaire presented below lies in collecting and organizing data concerning key traits and capacities relating to the CSO in question. However, making the best use of the information collected and organized by the questionnaire will require that the project officer ultimately responsible for the ADB initiative concerned (i) *establish the specific criteria appropriate to the selection task at hand*, and that he or she (ii) *identify the most appropriate selection process*. The latter task is one for which COSO is best-suited to provide assistance.

The prototype questionnaire that appears below is a modified version of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Framework for Selection Criteria in *Assessing CSO Capacity*, which was published in *UNDP and Civil Society Organizations: A Toolkit for Strengthening Partnerships* (2006). The following version consists of eight categories: (i) legal status, (ii) credibility, (iii) mission and governance, (iv) constituency and support, (v) technical capacity, (vi) managerial capacity, (vii) administrative capacity, and (viii) financial capacity.

### **Legal Status**

#### **Questions:**

- (i) Is the CSO legally established?
- (ii) Has it registered with the appropriate authorities?
- (iii) Is it in compliance with relevant legal or regulatory requirements?
- (iv) Who are its officers?

What to look for: (i) registration details at the appropriate government agency, and (ii) legal incorporation documents.

### **Credibility**

#### **Questions:**

- (i) When was the CSO established?
- (ii) Why was it created?
- (iii) How has the CSO's organization and scope of operations changed over time?
- (iv) Does the CSO subscribe to a particular code of conduct or ethics code?
- (v) Has it been certified (in countries with certification schemes)?
- (vi) Does it maintain and regularly update a detailed website?
- (vii) Does it publish independent evaluations of its activities?
- (viii) Is it transparent about its funding sources?
- (ix) Does it report decisions made by its governing board?
- (x) Is it perceived as being reputable by the media, the public, or decision makers?
- (xi) Does it insist on intellectual rigor and the use of facts in performing analyses?
- (xii) Does it adhere to agreements with other stakeholders?

What to look for: (i) a professional and informative website; (ii) favorable references in the media; (iii) listing in CSO directories; (iv) sincerity in engagement; (v) claims backed up by facts; (vi) actions consistent with stated mission; (vii) use by others as a source of reliable information; (viii) readiness to share information about its activities and the nature of the support it receives; and (ix) clarity about individuals' roles within the organization.

### **Mission and Governance**

#### **Questions:**

- (i) Does the CSO share ADB's overarching objective of poverty alleviation?
- (ii) Does it have a long-term development vision?

- (iii) Is it clear about its objectives and role?
- (iv) Who are its staff and management officials?
- (v) Are there related individuals on the board?
- (vi) Who serves on the governing body and what are the body's responsibilities?
- (vii) How does the governing body exercise oversight?
- (viii) Does it have a clearly communicated organizational structure?

What to look for: (i) coherent statement of mission, objectives, and vision; (ii) biographies of members of governing board and management; (iii) charter; and (iv) organizational chart.

### **Constituency and Support**

#### **Questions:**

- (i) Does the CSO have a clearly identified constituency?
- (ii) Is the organization membership based?
- (iii) Does the CSO have regular, participatory links to its constituency?
- (iv) Are constituents informed and supportive about the CSO and its activities?
- (v) Does the CSO belong to CSO thematic or sector associations, networks, or umbrella groups?
- (vi) Does the CSO have strong links within the CSO community and to other social institutions?
- (vii) Has the CSO conducted social audits (to assess its impact on society)?
- (viii) Does the CSO have partnerships with other organizations engaged in development work (e.g., government agencies, INGOs, foundations, UN agencies, other multilateral development banks)?

What to look for: (i) supportive statements from constituency members, (ii) activities geared to serve constituency, (iii) organizational affiliations, (iv) participation in conferences and workshops related to its primary field of activity, (v) partnerships with other reputable organizations, and (vi) record of sustained funding.

### **Technical Capacity**

#### ***Does the CSO:***

- (i) possess the required knowledge and technical skills?
- (ii) collect baseline information about its constituency?
- (iii) keep informed about the latest techniques, competencies, policies, and trends in its area of expertise?
- (iv) apply effective approaches to reach its targets?
- (v) have a strong presence in the field?
- (vi) effectively coordinate between field and office?

What to look for: (i) tools, (ii) methodologies, (iii) evaluations, (iv) use of indicators and benchmarking, (v) databases, (vi) staff turnover, (vii) trained paid personnel and volunteers, (viii) and reports on technical experience from development agencies relating to operations and capacity building.

### **Managerial Capacity**

#### ***Does the CSO:***

- (i) produce clear, internally consistent proposals and intervention frameworks?
- (ii) include a regular review in the development of a program, and organize program and project review meetings?
- (iii) translate strategic planning into operational activities?
- (iv) monitor progress against indicators and evaluate achievements?
- (v) include the viewpoint of beneficiaries in the design and review of its programming?

What to look for: (i) well-designed project and program documents, (ii) evaluation and monitoring reports; and (iii) evaluations and impact studies.

### **Administrative Capacity**

#### ***Does the CSO:***

- (i) possess logistical infrastructure and equipment?
- (ii) manage and maintain equipment?
- (iii) have the ability to produce goods, services, and works on a competitive basis?

What to look for: (i) adequate physical and logistical infrastructure including office facilities, space, computers, and resource materials; (ii) standard contracts for procurement; and (iii) written procedures for identifying appropriate vendors (e.g., obtaining the best price, issuing commitments).

### **Financial Capacity**

#### ***Does the CSO:***

- (i) produce program and project budgets, and have a regular budget cycle?
- (ii) have a track record of managing large sums of money?
- (iii) ensure physical security of advances, cash, and records?
- (iv) disburse funds in a timely and effective manner?
- (v) have procedures relating to authority, responsibility, monitoring, and accountability of handling funds?
- (vi) boast a record of financial stability and reliability?
- (vii) keep well-organized, accurate, and informative accounts?
- (viii) ensure proper financial recording and reporting?

What to look for: (i) operating budgets and financial reports; (ii) list of donors and funding details; (iii) written procedures for accounts payable, receivables, stock and inventory; (iv) reporting system that tracks commitments and expenditures against budgets by line; (v) bank account with regular statements; (vi) audited financial statements; (vii) a competent accounting system; and (viii) written procedures for processing payments and recording transactions.

