

EVALUATION OF NORWEGIAN CHURCH AID'S STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY WORK



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NORWEGIAN CHURCH AID
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Executive summary

Civil society is at the core of Norwegian Church Aid (NCA)'s work. NCA believes that *“a robust and free civil society is a prerequisite for social justice, development of democracy, and good governance, we will support and cooperate with civil society, including faith-based actors”*.¹

Over the course of the previous and current strategic periods, NCA has taken a different approach to its work on civil society. From 2010–2015, civil society was a dedicated programme with its own mandatory outcomes and indicators. In the current strategic period (2016–2020), *strengthening* civil society was treated as a cross-cutting issue to be addressed within each of the seven global programmes and with its own mandatory outcome.

NCA works in partnership with local civil society organisations (CSOs). NCA's *Partnership Policy* (September 2015) outlines the principles and strategic direction for NCA's partnership with CSOs. This policy embraces the global alliance CIVICUS's definition of civil society as *“the arena outside of the family, the state and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organisations and institutions to advance shared values and interests”*.² NCA's role in partnerships is *“to accompany partners and sustain their work”*,³ and it is assumed that NCA's presence *“adds value to the work of partners”*.⁴

The scope of this evaluation is limited to NCA's current strategic period, from 2016 to the present (early 2019). The evaluation objectives were:

1. To document how NCA (both at Head Office (HO) and Country Office (CO) levels) understands and operationalises the concept of strengthening civil society as part of its partnership approach and as a cross-cutting issue, and its alignment with NCA partners' perspectives.
2. To assess the impact of NCA's work:
 - a. on partners' capacity in key areas presumed to link to strengthening civil society (such as advocacy or networking capacity)
 - b. on civil society as a sector in a given national or regional context
3. To analyse how NCA plans project interventions, measures impact and documents its efforts to strengthen civil society.
4. To extract lessons of programmatic, strategic and organisational value to improve NCA's work towards strengthening civil society.

This evaluation engaged a wide range of stakeholders in late 2018, using a global e-survey, key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). Research participants included NCA staff based in the Oslo HO and in the field, as well as staff from local partner organisations and relevant government departments and resource organisations. The evaluation also included findings from two country case studies – Zambia and South Sudan. Fieldwork for these case studies was conducted in Lusaka, Zambia (3–11 December 2018) and Juba, South Sudan (3–15 December 2018).

Key findings:

Understandings of civil society

There is no single, common understanding of NCA's efforts to *strengthen civil society* either conceptually or as a methodology. This is true both within NCA and between NCA and partner

¹ NCA (2015). *Global Strategy: Faith in Action*. p.12.

² NCA (2015). *Partnership Policy*. p.4

³ NCA (2015). *Global Strategy: Faith in Action*. p.24.

⁴ Ibid.

organisations. At all levels (HO, CO and partner), 'success' in strengthening civil society is defined very differently – meaning that there are differing views on what characterises 'strong' versus 'weak' civil society. The shape of civil society is also highly context-dependent, a significant factor for an organisation that operates in multiple countries. In some locales, and for various reasons, faith-based actors do not consider themselves part of civil society. In other contexts, the lines between the market and civil society may be blurred. For that reason, NCA's approach to civil society tends to reflect these contextual realities.

NCA's partnership approach

Today's NCA is to a large extent defined by its partnership approach, which is not free from tensions – particularly the need to deliver services in a professional way. Working with and through partners is not always easy in humanitarian contexts. In practice, NCA's partnership approach as a means to strengthen civil society is manifested in building the capacity of partner organisations, primarily through training. NCA has tended to prioritise financial, administrative and human resources (HR) capacity building geared towards compliance and service delivery over strengthening organisational capacities in leadership, governance and fundraising. However, the latter are seen as important by partner organisations themselves. In many partnerships, competencies such as advocacy – that could be key to strengthening civil society by enabling partners to promote democratic governance – have not been prioritised by NCA.

Planning and reporting

The ways in which civil society programming is integrated into NCA's country strategies and programming more generally is not systematic across the organisation. Among the processes that inform planning for NCA's civil society work, Theory of Change (ToC) and baseline analysis are those most frequently used – although these tools did not always have a specific focus on civil society.

At NCA, capturing results relating to civil society tends to focus on building the capacity of partner organisations and their participation in national and regional networks, while often failing to capture important civil society-related results from within thematic programmes (such as water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) committees, VICOBA groups or women's groups). This is due both to the structure of the Annual Reporting template and, more importantly, having only one mandatory outcome for civil society during the period under review.

Impact

Understandably, given the circumstances outlined above, NCA's primary contribution to strengthening civil society has been through building the capacity of partner organisations as strong and influential actors in civil society. One factor that is common to NCA's impactful civil society interventions has been cooperation between NCA partners as well as between NCA and partners. This cooperation takes a number of forms, including in analysis or planning, but also joint advocacy initiatives.

However, there are also challenges and limitations to NCA's impact on strengthening civil society. In the absence of strategic planning and a long-term vision of how to strengthen civil society, NCA's impact in this area beyond strengthening its partners is limited to helping them build coalitions. Partner-centred capacity building has not reached a transformational effect at the organisational

level. Moreover, there is a risk that focusing on partners' capacity development focuses on these organisations just as service delivery agents, rather than potentially important actors for change.

Recommendations

1. Revise NCA's *Partnership Policy* and include additional guidance on how to operationalise strengthening civil society.
2. Take a systematic and broad (but nuanced) approach to assessing and developing the capacity of NCA's partners in line with their needs to fulfil their vision and ToC.
3. Conduct a thorough review of NCA's planning and reporting tools and update them.
4. Generate spaces for candid reflection on *why* and *how* NCA should engage with civil society to encourage strategic thinking and novel approaches.

List of acronyms

CHAZ	Churches Health Association of Zambia
CO	Country Office
CSO	Civil society organisation
DFID	UK Department for International Development
EU	European Union
FAWEZA	Forum for Africa Women Educationalists in Zambia
FBO	Faith-based organisation
FGD	Focus group discussion
HR	Human resources
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
JCP	Joint country programme
JCTR	Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection, Zambia
KII	Key informant interview
NCA	Norwegian Church Aid
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PMER	Planning, monitoring, evaluating and reporting
SSCC	South Sudan Council of Churches
ToC	Theory of Change
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene
ZCSMBA	Zambia Chamber of Small and Medium Business Associations

PART ONE

Introduction

1. Background

Civil society is at the core of Norwegian Church Aid (NCA)'s work. NCA believes that *“a robust and free civil society is a prerequisite for social justice, development of democracy, and good governance, we will support and cooperate with civil society, including faith-based actors.”*⁵

Over the course of its previous and current strategic periods, NCA has taken a different approach to its work on civil society. From 2010–2015 civil society was a dedicated programme at NCA with its own mandatory outcomes and indicators. In the current strategic period (2016–2020), strengthening civil society is treated as a cross-cutting issue to be addressed within each of NCA's seven global programmes, with its own mandatory outcome to *“strengthen citizens' active participation and thereby civil society for peace and equitable development”*.⁶

NCA's *Partnership Policy* (September 2015) outlines the principles and strategic direction for NCA's partnership with civil society organisations (CSOs). NCA's role is *“to accompany partners and sustain their work”*,⁷ and it is assumed that NCA's presence *“adds value to the work of partners”*.⁸ In most programmes and contexts, NCA prioritises working with faith-based actors.

The same document outlines partner cooperation as part of strengthening civil society, an understanding that permeates NCA's annual presentations of its work. For example, in the most recent (2017) report on results: *“NCA supports partners to open political space for civic engagement in governance at all levels of society, and to use existing room to hold governments accountable to constituencies”*.⁹ Furthermore, NCA is committed to systematise and document efforts to strengthen civil society in order to learn and continuously improve.¹⁰

Against this backdrop, NCA in 2018 decided to evaluate how it strengthens civil society. This evaluation was carried out by NCA, with targeted external support (see section 4. Evaluation team and quality assurance). It started in September 2018 and the analysis was completed in February 2019.

2. Scope of this evaluation

The scope of this evaluation was limited to NCA's current strategic period, from 2016 to the present (early 2019). Even though the evaluation includes case studies (see section 3. Methodological and analytical approach), it was a global and holistic evaluation of NCA's work to strengthen civil society, covering organisational understandings, policies, programmes on the ground, partnerships and impact.

The evaluation objectives were (see Annex I for evaluation questions):

1. To document how NCA (both at Head Office and Country Office (CO) levels) understands and operationalises the concept of strengthening civil society as part of its partnership approach and as a cross-cutting issue and its alignment with NCA partners' perspectives.

⁵ NCA (2015). *Global Strategy: Faith in Action*. p.12.

⁶ NCA (2015). *2016–2020 South Sudan Country Strategy*.

⁷ NCA (2015). *Global Strategy: Faith in Action*. p.24.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ NCA (2018). *NCA Progress Report to Norad 2017*. p.52.

¹⁰ NCA (2015). *Global Strategy: Faith in Action*. p.20.

2. To assess the impact of NCA's work
 - a. on partners' capacity in key areas linked to strengthening civil society (such as advocacy or networking).
 - b. on the civil society sector in a given national or regional context.
3. To analyse how NCA plans its support to strengthen civil society in project interventions, impact measurements and documents.
4. To identify programmatic, strategic and organisational lessons to improve NCA's work towards strengthening civil society.

Context singularities and differences between countries (in, for example, how local partners position themselves in relation to civil society) were accounted for. Similarly, this evaluation aimed to consider whether – and eventually how – NCA's varying organisational setups affect its work to strengthen civil society.

3. Methodological and analytical approach

Methods

This evaluation engaged a wide range of stakeholders, including NCA staff based in Oslo and in the field, as well as staff from local partner organisations and relevant government departments and resource organisations. The data collection methods and tools were designed to capture differences between stakeholders. These included:

- A desk review of relevant NCA documents (current and past policy documents, annual reports, assessments, evaluations, etc.) as well as relevant academic literature.
- Focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs), in person and via phone or Skype. (see Annexes II and III).
- A global survey gathering the views of NCA's current and past partners, as well as NCA in-country staff (see Annex IV).

With support from NCA COs, the evaluation team invited NCA partners in the current strategy period (2016 up to the time of the evaluation) to participate in the survey.¹¹ English, French, Portuguese and Spanish versions of the survey were available and 56 partner organisations responded.¹²

All NCA CO¹³ and Head Office staff received an email invitation to take part in the survey. The survey invitation and link were also posted on NCA's internal communication platform ONE. The survey was open from 22–31 October 2018. The evaluation team collected 58 responses, 27 from Head Office staff, 27 from CO staff and four from joint country programmes.

This evaluation included findings from two country case studies (Zambia and South Sudan). Fieldwork was conducted in Lusaka, Zambia (from 3–11 December 2018) and Juba, South Sudan (from 3–15 December 2018). The case studies were selected after consultations within the Steering Group and then with Heads of Division and Country Directors. The case study selection criteria were:

1. Space for civil society in the country.
2. Type of partnership (especially with faith-based organisations (FBOs)).

¹¹ The survey was open between 22 and 31 October 2018. A reminder was sent to all original recipients on 30 October.

¹² English survey (50 responses), French version (4 responses), Portuguese and Spanish versions (one response each).

¹³ Via country directors, finance and programme managers.

3. Budget allocation or size.
4. Conflict-affected country (ideally for one case study).
5. For how long NCA has had in-country interventions with a clear focus on strengthening civil society.
6. NCA organisational setup (such as in-country office, dedicated staff or focal points focusing on strengthening civil society).

Table 1 Country case studies – NCA profile

	NCA in South Sudan	NCA in Zambia
Local partners	22 (2018)	17 (2017)
Annual budget (2018)	88,600,880 NOK	NOK 32,200,468
Conflict-affected country	Yes	No
In-country presence	Since 1974	Since 2003
NCA organisational set-up	NCA CO	Joint country programme: Christian Aid (CA), Dan Church Aid (DCA) and Norwegian Church Aid (NCA)

Analytical approach

A vibrant civil society is key to accountable governance. It can take many forms and play different roles at local, national and international levels. This evaluation focused on the impact of NCA's support to strengthen civil society regarding democratisation and the realisation of human rights; i.e. beyond service delivery as an isolated area. There are several reasons for not focusing on service delivery as part of this evaluation – in other words, for asking the partners about their work beyond results in service delivery.¹⁴ Firstly, this dimension is frequently captured in NCA's reports and evaluations. Secondly, it is clear from the desk review of NCA's policy documents that NCA's goal in strengthening civil society is to develop more accountable and democratic governments through a human rights-based approach.

From this point of departure, the evaluation explored what NCA's impact on strengthening civil society looks like. From the academic and practitioner literature the evaluation team derived some possible impacts, organised around types of mobilisation and systems and institutions.

4. Evaluation team and quality assurance

The core evaluation team comprised Javier Fabra-Mata, PhD, senior advisor for programme analysis and research (lead) and Quinn Coffey, PhD, M&E advisor. The core team was responsible for the overall evaluation design, developing evaluation tools and implementing the evaluation, including writing this report. This model was used to increase the likelihood that the findings and general learning from the study would be absorbed internally. In addition to the core team, this evaluation used targeted external support to facilitate field studies.

Each core team member had the main responsibility for one of the country case studies, working closely with NCA South Sudan and the joint country programme (JCP) in Zambia. For in-country data collection, the core team worked with national evaluators: Charity Musamba, PhD (Zambia) and Gailda Jima (South Sudan).

¹⁴ This evaluation still acknowledges the significant role that service delivery can play in CSOs' survival in contexts with limited civic space (see, for example, Norad (2018). *Civil society under pressure. Synthesis study of evaluations of Civil Society Organisations' democratisation and human rights work in Southern and Eastern Africa*. Evaluation Department. Report 9.

In accordance with NCA's policies that guide its evaluative work, a Steering Group was established to oversee this evaluation.¹⁵ Together with the Steering Group, this global evaluation employed the following quality-assurance measures:

- A Reference Group made up of 14 partner organisations staff from Afghanistan, Malawi, Pakistan and South Sudan. The global survey asked respondents whether they would like to be contacted for follow-up information, such as contributing a case study or elaborating further on their responses. The evaluation team contacted those who responded affirmatively (37), inviting them to review the draft report – an invitation that 14 respondents kindly accepted.
- Two external people were engaged as peer reviewers due to their thematic expertise, to provide feedback on the draft evaluation report.¹⁶

5. Constraints, risks and mitigation strategies

During the inception phase, the evaluation team recognised the absence of a full articulation of NCA's theory of change (ToC) for its work on strengthening civil society as a key constraint. Desk study and interviews conducted during the inception phase soon highlighted that NCA's theory of how change would happen was reduced to *"if partners' capacities are strengthened then civil society in the country will be strengthened as well because partners are civil society actors and would be able to perform their role in promoting the betterment of society"*.

Apart from unpacking and critically revisiting the assumptions underlying NCA's key ToC, the evaluation team attempted to 'fill the gaps' in dimensions of strengthening civil society emerging from the literature. It considered the interplay between mobilisation and social transformation at three levels (sub-national, national, and regional/international). The analysis of understandings of civil society (see Part 2, section 1) helped refine the dimensions in which the results of NCA support would be assessed (see Part 2, section 4). Three risks identified in the inception report (low organisational interest in leading and participating in the evaluation; significant delays halting the evaluation; partners refusing to contribute to the evaluation) did not materialise.

The mixed method approach employed in this evaluation typically faces some sources of bias that must be mitigated to ensure confidence in the data collected.

Selection bias is the risk that those agreeing to be interviewed are possibly more positively inclined toward the project. Moreover, there was a risk of respondents being associated with NCA as staff or current partners, which might have generated a more favourable perspective than if independent outsiders or former associates were involved. Social influence bias is the risk that informants may have been motivated to provide responses that would be considered socially desirable or influential in obtaining NCA support in future.

¹⁵ This group included NCA CO managers as well as Head Office staff: Kristina Rødahl, Senior Advisor for Guatemala and Civil Society Partnerships; Anne Masterson, Country Director, NCA Pakistan; James John, Deputy Country Director, NCA Pakistan; Gwen Berge, Country Director, NCA Tanzania; Arne Dale, Senior Advisor, Politics and Society Department; Anders Tunold, Senior Humanitarian Coordinator; Quinn Coffey; and Javier Fabra-Mata (Steering Group Coordinator).

¹⁶ Nuno S. Themudo, PhD, Associate Professor, Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Pittsburgh; Einar Braathen, PhD, Researcher, Centre for Welfare and Labour Research, International Studies and Migration, OsloMet.

These potential biases were mitigated through several strategies:

- 1) Using multiple sources to triangulate data for each evaluation question.
- 2) Combining information found in documents and interviews with multiple sources.
- 3) Designing data collection tools to avoid leading questions.
- 4) Assuring all informants of the confidentiality of their contributions (interviewees were offered the option of having their names omitted from the final list annexed to this evaluation report).

To reduce the selection bias risk, the NCA partners invited to participate in the survey included all those in NCA's partner portfolio in the current strategic period (2016 to late 2018), which included some former NCA partners – two such responses (3.57%) were received. In the case of NCA, respondents included those who do not work directly with project implementation or partners. For the South Sudan and Zambia country case studies, interviewees included former partners and external informants (such as government, diplomatic delegation or international non-governmental organisation (INGO) representatives and civil society experts) not directly linked to NCA project interventions. By combining information from multiple sources, any single piece of biased data did not skew the analysis. Consequently, the evaluation team is confident in the quality of the data.

The evaluation team had planned to conduct virtual FGDs with key stakeholders within NCA, to go deeper into preliminary findings. The team decided not to pursue this due to other resource-intensive organisational tasks in the first quarter of 2019 (the new strategy development and three-year reporting processes), since the absence of this additional measure did not affect the data collection or the analysis process. As stated above, the validation of findings in the draft report relied on multiple readers – the Evaluation Steering Group, 14 partner organisations and three external reviewers. The draft report was also shared with NCA representatives in South Sudan and Zambia. Even in the absence of virtual focus groups, different programme managers and country directors did have the opportunity to provide feedback on the report.

The evaluation survey was a useful tool to tackle several evaluation questions – and engage partners and NCA staff alike. In the partner questionnaire, one question could have been added on how partners assess the overall civil society situation in their countries. While this omission did not affect the analysis, such a question could have been useful for cross-tabulation.

6. Structure of the report

The evaluation findings are presented in Part 2. Section 1 explores understandings of strengthening civil society among NCA and its partners. Section 2 lays out NCA's partnership approach in practice, how it is operationalised, relational dynamics and trust. Section 3 presents findings related to planning for and reporting on strengthening civil society (i.e. the strengths and weaknesses of tools and approaches and experiences using them). Finally, NCA's achievements in strengthening civil society, in both organisational strengthening and broader impact, are shown in Section 4. Part 3 includes Conclusions (Section 1) and Recommendations (Section 2).

PART TWO

1. Understandings of civil society

1.1 Who or what is civil society?

The clearest definition of how NCA understands civil society as an organisation is presented in the *Partnership Policy*, which adopts the global alliance CIVICUS definition of civil society as:

The arena outside of the family, the state and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organisations and institutions to advance shared values and interests.¹⁷

This is a definition common to academic and practitioner literature and points to a broad understanding of civil society as a ‘space’ or ‘arena’ rather than an organisation-centric approach. NCA’s *Partnership Policy* elaborates upon this definition, clarifying how it relates specifically to NCA and presents the clearest picture of how NCA defines and understands the scope of civil society:

Actors included in civil society vary from country to country, but generally [include] a wide-range of formal and informal organisations and networks. This includes faith-based actors, social movements, non-governmental organisations, women’s associations, or various other grassroots or community-based associations, such as village councils, peace committees, savings groups, water management committees and disaster preparedness committees.¹⁸

Importantly, this more expansive definition of civil society includes both formal and informal structures, while also bringing some of the grassroots actors with which NCA’s programmes typically work (like water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) committees).

In general, there is no common view of what constitutes civil society among NCA Head Office staff. Rather, there is a mixture of what can be described as an ‘organisation-centric’ view, in which civil society primarily comprises civil society organisation (CSOs) (including faith-based actors) and an ‘arena’ view, in which civil society includes a broad scope of CSOs, formal or informal interest groups, etc. Interviews and survey responses for this evaluation show that there is a correlation between length of employment with NCA, involvement with field offices, and the type of role(s) held by the respondent at Head Office and their view on civil society. Those who were employed during the 2010–2015 strategic period or longer tended to have a broader view of civil society.

Additionally, most staff suggested that NCA tends to work with organisations, rather than at the grassroots level, because it works through partners and needs to deliver on outcomes.

We are an INGO, we have systems and requirements and therefore we work mostly with other [non-governmental organisations] (NGOs) who can deliver on those demands. I think probably we have in the past [worked in a more grassroots way], before the aid sector was professionalised the way we know it today.... It doesn’t mean we don’t need to work with community-based groups The need to be efficient, cost-efficient, with demands from

¹⁷ CIVICUS (updated). *Guide to Reporting Civic Space: Media Toolkit*. Available at: <https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/reporting-civic-space/Guide-to-Reporting-Civic-Space-Media-Toolkit.pdf>

¹⁸ NCA (2015). *Partnership Policy*. P4.

Norad. I am very conscious about the difference between cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness because I think [work] can be cost-effective and not be cheap.¹⁹

Other respondents considered community-based groups to be essential civil society actors in addition to more formal organisations but maintained that NCA's partner organisations are its point of entry into working with these community-based groups.

The partners and stakeholders of NCA's JCP in Zambia could define civil society is but were able to explain what civil society does – a function-based definition. For some partners, the role of civil society was to complement government in service provision – meaning that civil society is successful when those services feed into state service provision and are provided in a timely manner. Some partners have been working closely with government and have a working memorandum of understanding with relevant ministries. In the case of one partner, these close working relationships have resulted in the following outcome:

Our target groups think that [our organisation] is part of government because we go into the field as one group – so the community members do not see any difference. They have looked after property, such as storage fridges, very well because they say that these are 'government' properties.

For some partners in Zambia, the role of civil society was to influence policy, policy outcomes and public service delivery, so they undertake advocacy and lobbying activities. For some, civil society was critical in providing oversight and acting as watchdogs to ensure that the government was accountable to citizens in its management of public affairs. In this view, the role of civil society is to demand social progress and hold duty bearers to account, and success is achieved when engagement with duty bearers occurred (minimalistic understanding) or when changes occur (maximalist approach).

Other partners held the view that civil society was there to act as a mouthpiece – and organisers – of empowerment. And for some partners, the role of civil society was to participate in the country's political and economic governance to provide an alternative voice. For example, most of the JCP partners focusing on resource use had been engaging political stakeholders and policy-makers in their advocacy and lobbying activities to ensure that local communities participated in the management of, and benefited from, the country's natural resources.

In sum, in Zambia there is no consensus among partners as to what civil society is or what strengthening civil society looks like, but most associate the term with strengthening their organisations as members of civil society. A minority of partners have a narrow understanding of civil society as service delivery, and a self-image as service delivery agents. While less marked, the disparity in views of what civil society is or should be doing also appeared among JCP programme staff.

In South Sudan, NCA programme staff and managers do not share a common understanding of civil society, but all agreed that there was a disconnect between NCA's global definitions in internal policy documents and the local context. This includes both how NCA conceptualises civil society and, to an even greater degree, how NCA operationalises its efforts to strengthen civil society.

¹⁹ KII 6.

NCA policy documents speak of faith actors under the umbrella of civil society, but the faith actors [in South Sudan] do not consider themselves part of civil society because they are part of the church. [Local faith actors'] understanding of civil society is very confusing – they look at civil society as small independent and secular entities.²⁰

There was a sense from programme staff in South Sudan that strengthening civil society was more of a compliance issue than a part of planning, way of working or something included in an overall ToC: “when writing the annual report or annual plan there is a section on strengthening civil society so then we must put something there”²¹. In other words, staff were aware that strengthening civil society is something that NCA prioritises but were unclear of what this means in practice. In part, this was because staff felt that civil society was not adequately defined in NCA’s policy documents, but also because the ways in which COs are meant to help strengthen civil society are not well established.

In summary, civil society as a concept was viewed as important in the South Sudanese context and this was reflected in the country strategy, but it is not yet pursued systematically at the operational level. This is due, in part, to opaque definitions and methodologies from Head Office, but also context-related issues like the legal status of civil society versus church-affiliated organisations, the perceived neutrality of the church versus civil society and instability related to security issues. In practice, this means that NCA’s South Sudan office is strengthening civil society via its programmes and its faith-based partners, but this work is not necessarily described as such.

1.2 Are faith actors part of civil society?

FBOs are increasingly recognised as sources of pro-social ethical values, convenors of different social groups, drivers of social change, and providers of critical human, physical and social capital.²² Indeed, FBOs are critical to the lives of citizens as most people in developing countries engage in religious practice on a regular basis.²³

NCA’s *Partnership Policy* lists faith-based actors as important civil society actors. A majority of Head Office staff interviewed for this evaluation suggested that faith-based actors, in particular FBOs, are NCA’s primary point of entry into civil society in its areas of operation.

The most solid [primary group NCA works with] we have in NCA is in the FBO category. In practice this basically means church-based organisations. It’s very rare that we work with other kind of organisations, I think.²⁴

I think a key is of course faith-based actors and in general we have been for a long time trying to strengthen and support civil society actors with a special emphasis on faith actors.²⁵

²⁰ NCA South Sudan case study report.

²¹ NCA South Sudan case study report.

²² World Economic Forum (WEF) (2013). *The Future Role of Civil Society*. World Scenario Series. WEF.

²³ UK Department for International Development (DFID) (2012). *Faith Partnership Principles: Working Effectively with Faith Groups to Fight Global Poverty*, London: UK DFID. Available at: <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications1/faith-partnershipprinciples.pdf>. Haidt, J. (2012). *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Vintage.

²⁴ KII 1 – NCA Head Office.

²⁵ KII 4 – NCA Head Office.

At the field level, NCA's partners' views are far more complex. Some FBOs do not want to be presented as civil society – for example in FBO advocacy on gender with the African Union.²⁶ This seemed to be based on necessity or strategy rather than any ideological opposition to the 'civil society' label. While, overall, FBOs in Zambia did not object to this label, NCA's South Sudanese FBO partners rejected it more strongly.

NCA bases its definition of civil society on global definitions. But some... churches don't want to be put under this definition. What is the definition of civil society from a faith-based perspective? I think NCA needs to put this into context because our mandate is with the churches.

In the South Sudanese context, the Islamic Council or Council of Churches don't consider themselves to be civil society because they don't follow the [legal] requirements for civil society like registration. That's why it is difficult to have one common understanding of civil society across NCA because each country has their own unique context.

We are a church, we have nothing to do with civil society, however [partner organisation] keeps some civil society under its umbrella to protect them[selves], they use our office for meetings, because in [partner organisation] we don't need permissions to conduct meeting from the government.²⁷

In South Sudan, informants contrasted faith actors with 'activist' secular organisations that were considered part of civil society. In the view of NCA's FBO partners, peacebuilding and mediation work between the government and opposition would be impossible if they were labelled as 'civil society' because they would no longer appear to be neutral. Additionally, from a legal perspective, churches and FBOs are protected from extra scrutiny because they are not registered as CSOs and can therefore operate with more freedom than secular CSOs.

Strong civil society [organisations] in South Sudan should be free in implementing their activities, and this cannot happen in South Sudan because each time a civil society organisation wants to be strong they will be squeezed by the policy of the government. They are demanded to register as a humanitarian organisation and have to pay humanitarian bills which keeps them [on] a hook. [Partner organisation] has been here for a long time and... as a faith-based organisation we are not registered so we are not hooked. We have been asked to register but we refused because we don't want to be subjected to unlawful laws.²⁸

Although NCA South Sudan does partner with 'secular' organisations in WASH and peacebuilding programmes, in general programme staff viewed secular organisations, particularly community-based ones, as beyond NCA's mandate: *"Some of these smaller [secular] organisations have approached us about partnerships, but we told them that we only work with FBOs."*²⁹ However, programme staff also suggested that this sentiment was rooted in a conceptual misunderstanding of CSOs, rather than being part of NCA South Sudan's approach. This view is shared by NCA managers, one of whom suggested that *"The mandate of NCA is to work with faith-based partners, but we also*

²⁶ KII 5 – NCA Head Office.

²⁷ NCA South Sudan case study report.

²⁸ NCA South Sudan case study report.

²⁹ NCA South Sudan case study report.

*work with other types of partners for shorter periods of time on specific objectives.*³⁰ Although FBOs in South Sudan do not consider themselves part of civil society, it was clear that NCA programme staff and managers recognised their contribution to strengthening civil society. In other words, the definition of CSO versus FBO did not appear to have much impact on programme design.

NCA South Sudan and Zambia research participants shared a similar mixture of ‘organisational’ and ‘arena’ views of civil society, which ultimately affected how NCA operationalises strengthening civil society in both countries. Operationally, it was clear that both COs closely associated strengthening civil society with building partners’ capacity. In South Sudan, FBOs’ rejection of the ‘civil society’ label says more about the restrictive space for civil society in that country than how NCA and partners work to strengthen civil society – NCA South Sudan continues to strengthen partners whether or not they consider themselves part of civil society.

1.3 NCA’s role in relation to civil society actors

Most respondents agreed that NCA does not work strategically with civil society, and that its efforts to strengthen civil society tend to be ad hoc and geographically isolated.

I don’t think NCA really has one approach to strengthening civil society. I don’t know all country programmes in detail, but from the context I have seen... Take Palestine as an example: I don’t think we have a real strategy for building, strengthening civil society other than working with church institutions, as well as other partners because the analysis is that they are important institutions within civil society in a given context. But I don’t think that constitutes a shared approach or clear strategy.³¹

Respondents identified a range of ways in which NCA works with civil society, as outlined below.

Mobilisation of communities or interest groups for an advocacy objective

As a convener, NCA often helps to connect partners and interest groups around a common advocacy objective. This could be a long-term network for women’s rights that meets regularly or a shorter-term network around a specific advocacy campaign like the 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence in South Sudan. This approach could also include building local interest groups like WASH committees or parent-teacher groups.

Strengthening the organisational capacity of partners

Most respondents suggested that building the capacity of partners was NCA’s primary way of strengthening civil society. With resource partners, this may involve building their technical capacity in service delivery, such as in WASH. With core partners like faith-based actors, this could include building organisational capacity in the form of good internal governance and accountability or financial and project management.

Respondents who identified capacity building as an NCA approach to strengthening civil society emphasised the importance of capacity building to enable partners to achieve their own objectives. In other words, NCA could support a women’s rights organisation through financial or HR training in order for that organisation to more easily pursue its aim of promoting women’s rights.

³⁰ NCA South Sudan case study report.

³¹ KII 6 – NCA Head Office.

Helping [partners] organise, mobilise and follow up the goals that are supposed to be achieved (education, poverty, etc.). So it's about looking at the budget [or] challenging some leadership, but also maybe [challenging] some norms – fighting inequality.³²

Building and facilitating connections between partners and wider networks

Respondents who identified the importance of building and facilitating CSO networks saw a strong connection between (and in most cases had first-hand experience of) a strong network and greater efficacy of collaborative advocacy campaigns.

I think that strengthening civil society is not strengthening organisations but has a broader perspective – that a partner works together with others... to strengthen a network in order to have influence in the region, local context or the country and internationally. That, for me, is strengthening civil society.³³

Additionally, NCA can play an important role in connecting partner organisations – particularly small ones – to national, regional and international networks.

[NCA has a role in] Opening the space, because we have access to different platforms at national, regional, and international levels. Give [partners] access. Inform them about these processes. Sometimes they have limited information and when they receive that information they might decide to upscale, for example [in] advocacy work.³⁴

As mentioned earlier, it is not unusual for NCA to prioritise working with faith-based actors. An important role that NCA often plays is to raise the capacity of FBOs, churches or structures so they can more effectively deliver services, advocate and manage their operations. Another important role for NCA is being a translator or mediator between the faith-based and development sectors.

We... work in at least two dimensions with civil society. From an identity perspective, there is a need for a bilingual approach – understanding that when we've chosen to work with faith-based actors in many cases we need to be able to speak languages that are different [than other INGOs]. On the one hand, [there is] developmental terminology on civil society, on the other [there is] faith-based. So we need... to understand that our civil society work is also based on our identity.³⁵

Respondents saw the value of linking core and resource partners with those missing clarity on issues such as who brings what to the partnership and the overall objective.

1.4 How does NCA strengthen civil society?

Most respondents agreed that NCA's work to strengthen civil society was not systematic. According to respondents, in each context this work should begin with a discussion on the role NCA can play in civil society.

³² KII 3 – NCA Head Office.

³³ FGD 1 – NCA Head Office.

³⁴ KII 5 – NCA Head Office.

³⁵ KII 2 – NCA Head Office.

We have partner policy documents, strengthening civil society as a cross-cutting theme... We do it... consciously or unconsciously in many countries. But [there is] not a plan... We should have a discussion on what type of role we play in civil society.³⁶

Other respondents felt that NCA's work to strengthen civil society was highly dependent on CO the capacity.

We say that we work with civil society but in the COs it's not like they have a civil society officer... [this type of work] is very much about networking and... human resources. And if the human resources are not there, then it's difficult...³⁷

The long history of development and humanitarian aid in what is now South Sudan has meant that the government tends to rely on donors to fulfil most of its obligations to the people. Consequently, most respondents agreed that the macro or long-term goals of strengthening civil society in South Sudan should be to make the rights-holders aware of their rights, while also making government aware of its responsibilities.

At a micro level or in the short term, respondents in South Sudan saw building the capacity of partners as a key methodology in NCA's civil society work, not necessarily connected to the longer-term goal described above. In other words, building partners' capacity so that they could deliver services, but not necessarily as part of a longer-term strategy to improve civil society as a whole. Due to the very insecure context, building the capacity of partners so they can be self-sustaining and deliver operationally emerges as a key priority for NCA South Sudan.

According to South Sudanese partners, the role of civil society is partly to raise awareness among rights-holders so they are better equipped to advocate for their rights. However, most partners identified that widespread insecurity and poverty mean that simply raising awareness is not enough to achieve this – what is needed is holistic engagement with humanitarian and development aid.

Most partners identified capacity building as the primary way in which NCA strengthens civil society in South Sudan. They believed NCA's role should be to build the capacity of CSOs so they are able to fulfil their own objectives. They suggested that capacity strengthening should include securing funding and/or training partners in fundraising to make sure they are sustainable in the long-term.

Another role of civil society identified by South Sudanese partners is service delivery. But there were different views on how far NCA should intervene to improve CSOs' efficiency. One partner gave the impression that CSOs tend to be operationally very weak.

But today NCA wants to use civil society as a quick fix and get the report. If NCA does direct implementation for it is projects, NCA will save time and effort and will be attached [to the] community.³⁸

Therefore, this partner felt that NCA wasted its funds and should self-implement instead.

³⁶ KII 6 – NCA Head Office.

³⁷ FGD II – NCA Head Office.

³⁸ NCA South Sudan case study report.

In the 1970s when NCA headquarters was in Torit, Eastern Equatoria, NCA did all the work and did not use small NGOs to implement for them. NCA used local people as employees and built their capacity. Projects implemented by civil society have no impact on the people – they just get grants and do workshops.³⁹

In other words, this partner did not see a link between building the capacity of local partners and a longer-term improvement in civil society.

Other partners saw a strong link between building the capacity of CSOs and a stronger national civil society. Longer-term strategic goals, such as a vibrant civil society or a more democratic society were not identified by respondents. Rather, they highlighted the most acute needs or goals of building the capacity of local organisations so they could meet their own goals and eventually be self-sustaining.

1.5 What is success in strengthening civil society?

NCA's policy documents are less specific when it comes to goals of *strengthening* civil society. They imply that contextual specificity means that what constitutes a 'strong civil society' will vary between COs. But, broadly speaking, the *Programme Plan* suggests:

NCA envisions communities where people are active participants in their own development and organise themselves to claim their rights. In other words, the interaction between active citizens, a vibrant civil society, and accountable states is fundamental for NCA to achieve its goals.⁴⁰

The phrases 'active citizenship', 'vibrant civil society' and 'accountable governance' are key to understanding NCA's goal and vision around strengthening civil society. NCA links participation and solidarity with building a vibrant civil society, which can then hold government accountable. This multi-layered characterisation hints at what success in strengthening civil society might look like.

The following are examples of 'successful' civil society outcomes derived from interview material and survey responses:

- Partner-centred (narrow) (focusing on financial, programmatic).
- Partner-centred (broad) (focusing on leadership, governance).
- Empowerment, mobilisation, civic culture: contributing to facilitating community and societal empowerment, mobilisation and a culture of participation and rights.
- Accountability: Holding duty bearers accountable.
- Space: creating or expanding the space for civil society (to promote democratic governance), including creating and using this space for constructive interaction between CSOs and duty bearers.
- System-institutional change: prompting transformational changes in normative frameworks and the overall betterment of society.

Checking NCA and partners' views against that list highlights similarities and differences in their definitions of success. Figure 1 illustrates NCA staff members' multi-faceted understanding of success, incorporating both transformational and accountability aspects. On the other hand, partners prioritise success in strengthening CSOs, in both narrow and broad senses – as shown in Figure 2.

³⁹ NCA South Sudan case study report.

⁴⁰ NCA (2015). *Programme Plan 2016 - 2020*, p.4

Figure 1

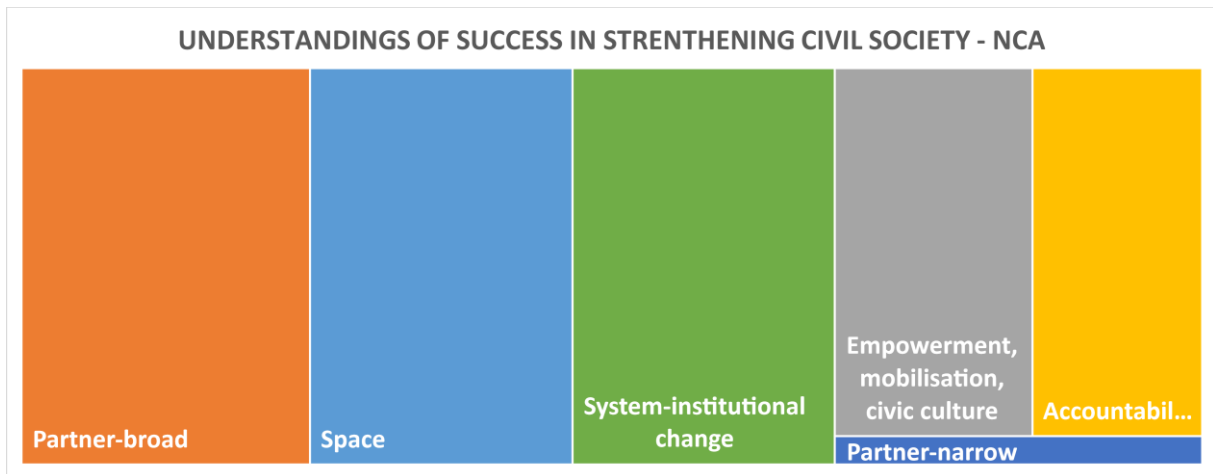
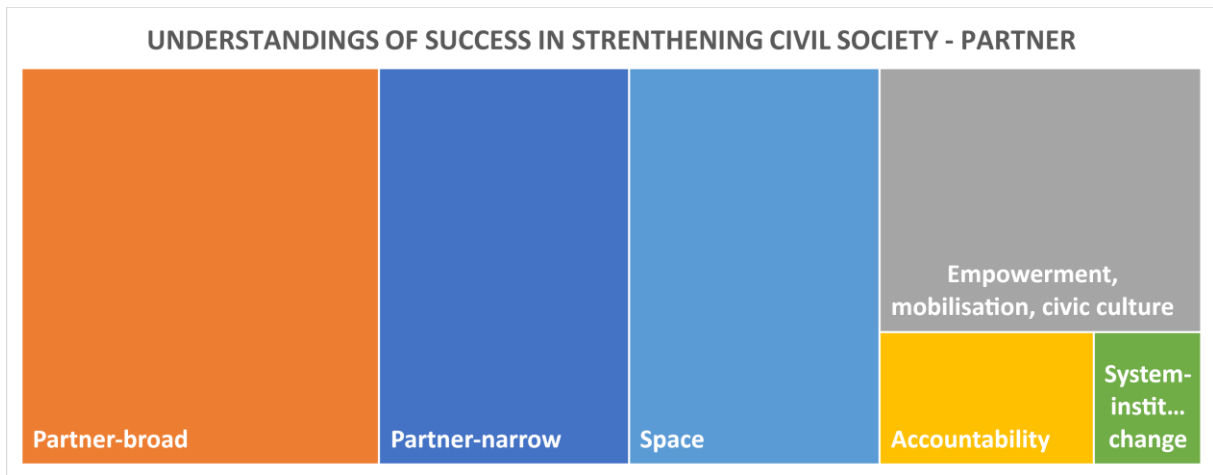


Figure 2



2. Partnership

Partnership is NCA's key working methodology. As the *Global Strategy* notes, "most of our work is undertaken together with local civil society partners – many of whom are faith-based actors."⁴¹ This section goes into more depth on how NCA strengthens civil society through partnership. Firstly, by looking at how NCA understands partnership, then exploring the form of its support to partners, NCA and partners' roles and responsibilities in this process and, finally, trust and communication between NCA and its partners.

2.1 Partnership in NCA

NCA's partners are its primary connection to civil society in the contexts where it works.

National and local civil society partner organisations are part of the wider civil society in the countries where NCA operates. NCA's partner approach is based on the belief that working with local organisations will enhance participation and local ownership. It also strengthens the sustainability of civil society organisations that deliver services to marginalised groups and promote human rights.⁴²

Although the partnership approaches may vary slightly by context, NCA primarily works through three partnership models:

- **Core partners:** NCA's primary link to local communities and national authorities. These actors are rooted in the communities where they work, have a clear mandate to represent marginalised people and vulnerable rights-holders and collaborate with NCA on a long-term basis.
- **Resource partners:** NCA has developed relationships with specialised, professional organisations and institutions in relevant fields, which are resource organisations for faith-based partners. Resource organisations contribute a wide range of knowledge, competencies and skills that might not be readily available within FBOs and NCA supported networks. Resource organisations complement FBOs' ability to reach and mobilise all segments of society and strengthen their competence and networks. They primarily strengthen the capacity of core partners, although where specialised skills are required, they also implement projects directly.
- **Strategic networks:** NCA cooperates with strategic networks and alliances at national, regional and global levels. Strategic networks include informal networks and social movements, including organisations with which NCA has non-funding relationships, for instance those linked to joint advocacy initiatives.⁴³

Although NCA typically works through partners, factors like conflict and the low capacity of local CSOs (particularly in technical tasks like WASH and health) mean that, in practice, NCA is semi-operational in a few contexts. This was the case in the South Sudan CO, where staff felt that internal partnership methods could not adequately address local needs and NCA is working semi-operationally in most programmes. This includes supporting staffing costs for partners, close financial follow-up, seconding NCA staff to partners and service delivery.

⁴¹ NCA (2015). *Global Strategy: Faith in Action*, p.9.

⁴² NCA (2015). *Partnership Policy*.

⁴³ Ibid, p.5.

Our approach to strengthening civil society has changed with the level of investment in South Sudan and the level of commitment. For the past three years [2016 – 2018], NCA was pushed towards operationality because partners were not effectively equipped. They are not strong in delivering humanitarian aid – [South Sudan Council of Churches] (SSCC) is not a humanitarian agency, it is an umbrella organisation under which member churches are organised. Therefore, leaving operations to churches or CSOs on the ground that don't necessarily have the capacity for this work is a challenge for NCA. However, we are equipping these partners to be operational.⁴⁴

From the perspective of Head Office staff, there is tension between a strong desire for effective and efficient service delivery (particularly in emergencies) and building the capacity of local actors in order to serve the much longer-term goal of strengthening civil society.

This is, in a way, our Achilles heel. We often come in on an emergency....[but] we seek to work in our three-approach model: advocacy, long term, emergency – never do we only have a one-dimensional approach in a country strategically. Then let's say something happens and needs – because of an emergency – rise. At that point we have a dilemma: do we work operationally to address needs, do we increase our volume or do we do this all through partnerships? Do we increase partnerships or suppress them? So on the one hand, there is a crisis and this is what we have to do, but if we do this through partners do we overinflate them [in a way that isn't sustainable] or do we suppress them? Ideally, ... we have room for increasing [the] capacity of partners so that when we keep on working with the three circles there's a legitimate room for the emergency part... but we need to manage this balance so that we've lifted capacities sustainably.⁴⁵

2.2 Modalities of support

The partnership support that NCA can provide takes many forms (see box for an example from Ethiopia). The evaluation asked partners about the type of support they receive from NCA.⁴⁶ Formal training is the main channel cited by partners (37.8% of responses), either delivered by NCA staff (21.3%) or external consultants. Visits and informal dialogue with NCA CO staff were the second most common response (23.6%). The least cited channels are visits and informal dialogue with NCA Head Office (10.65%), introducing the partner to other humanitarian or development actors and networks (13%), and synergising efforts among national actors to strengthen civil society (14.7%).

Box 1 NCA's support to Tamira in Ethiopia⁴⁷

NCA's support to its partner Tamira's new Safe Youth and Maternal Health Programme in Ethiopia included three types of professional support. NCA helped:

1. Develop the questionnaire used in the project's needs assessments and helped crystallise findings from the survey.

⁴⁴ NCA South Sudan case study report.

⁴⁵ KII 2 – NCA Head Office.

⁴⁶ The options given in the e-survey were (multiple-choice; n=49): Visits and informal dialogue with NCA CO staff; Visits and informal dialogue with NCA Head Office; Formal training delivered by NCA staff; Formal training delivered by consultants; Introducing you to other humanitarian or development actors and networks; synergising efforts among national actors to strengthen civil society in your country. 'I don't know' and 'Other' options not computed in the analysis.

⁴⁷ Adapted from Norad (2018). *From Donors to Partners? Evaluation of Norwegian Support to Strengthen Civil Society in Developing Countries through Norwegian Civil Society Organisations*. Evaluation Department. Report 1. P.30.

2. Facilitate training of Tamira staff before the project launch and attended Tamira’s sensitising workshop with representatives from communities, the government and other CSOs.
3. With specific training on the programme’s new maternal healthcare component, including training trainers.

Beyond this, NCA formally visits the programme twice a year for monitoring purposes in addition to more frequent informal visits. In interviews with the evaluation team, Tamira spoke highly of the relevance and quality of the professional support received from NCA.

The results from the global survey correspond well with findings from the country studies conducted for this evaluation. In Zambia, the JCP’s main channels to support partners, beyond providing financial support, have been visits and informal dialogue with CO staff and formal training delivered by JCP staff or external experts. In contrast, visits and informal dialogue with JCP Head Offices have been unsurprisingly limited.

When asked whether the JCP has introduced them to other humanitarian or development actors and networks, partners reported some efforts to do this but generally believed that there is room for improvement in this area. Still, there are notable examples of the JCP playing a facilitation and network role and bringing partners together:

- Two JCP partners jointly trained target groups in 2018 on upscaling small and medium scale enterprises.
- JCP facilitated using gender expertise from one partner in a training workshop held by another partner.
- One JCP partner worked closely with another in promoting access to land for its local community groups and cooperatives.
- JCP facilitated one partner’s visit to Malawi in 2017 to help it gain hands-on experience and knowledge of nutrition.
- Another partner is scheduled to attend a 2019 regional conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on WASH through the connections facilitated by the JCP.

Although, as discussed above, NCA staff identified several ways in which NCA works to strengthen civil society, they considered capacity building of partner organisations to be an essential aspect of NCA’s added value. The global survey asked NCA staff what they considered as NCA’s main contribution to strengthening civil society. A large majority (70.6%) cited strengthening the capacity of partners.⁴⁸ NCA’s *Partnership Policy* lays out the key areas for partners’ capacity development, based on findings from the Partnership Assessment Tool. These categories are broken down in Table 2.

Table 2 : Capacity building as defined in NCA’s Partnership Policy

Category	Sub-category
Organisational capacity	Fundraising capacity
	Strategy and planning, monitoring, evaluating and reporting (PMER)
	HR, Code of Conduct and security

⁴⁸ By comparison, 12% of NCA respondents answered “network for advocacy” as main contribution.

Accountability capacity	Internal democratic governance
	Integrating gender justice
	Participation of rights-holders
Advocacy capacity⁴⁹	Advocacy methods
	Cooperation in civil society networks
	Interaction with government and other decision-makers
Financial capacity	Budget processes
	Financial systems
	Internal controls
	Reporting processes

NCA's capacity support to partner organisations is reported in the *Strengthening Civil Society* section of CO annual reports. Analysis of NCA's 2016 and 2017 annual reports gives some insights into COs' capacity-building priorities, as outlined in Table 3.⁵⁰

Table 3: Breakdown of CO capacity-building of partners by type of support, 2016–17'

Type of support	Frequency	Example
Financial, administration or HR	22%	"7 partners received financial management training, focusing on drafting annual financial statements, preparing organisational annual budgets and understanding annual financial statements." ⁵¹
Technical or thematic	21%	"Training IR-VICOBA groups in business development and entrepreneurship including smallholder empowerment and vegetable enterprise projects." ⁵²
Networking	14%	"A series of joint training and advocacy initiatives requiring partners to collaborate more closely, and to link with others involved in promoting public participation in the budget process." ⁵³
PMER	14%	"NCA organised a five-day workshop for staff and partners to strengthen their capacity around PMER." ⁵⁴
Leadership, governance or strategy	13%	"Support ranged from mentoring the General Secretary to supporting an organisational review and reformulating organisational charts to assistance in staff recruitment." ⁵⁵
Advocacy methods	8%	"CCA/Y members have been trained in advocacy techniques to help them address their needs and priorities, especially access to health services and information about reproductive health." ⁵⁶
Fundraising capacity	8%	"Providing technical support to PDF to diversify its donor base and develop three-year fundraising plans." ⁵⁷

This data corresponds well with NCA staff perceptions of where NCA should focus its capacity building efforts. The evaluation survey asked NCA Head Office and CO staff where NCA should focus

⁴⁹ NCA's 2015 *Partnership Policy* presents this as "capacities to strengthen and have a role in the wider civil society" (p.9).

⁵⁰ This analysis was conducted using the NVivo qualitative analysis software and included 20 annual reports from 2016 and 2017. This required expanding upon the categories in NCA's 2015 *Partnership Policy* (Table 1) which only defines capacity-building areas in a broad sense.

⁵¹ NCA (2017). *Afghanistan Annual Report*.

⁵² NCA (2016). *Tanzania Annual Report*.

⁵³ NCA (2017). *Angola Annual Report*.

⁵⁴ NCA (2016). *Somalia Annual Report*.

⁵⁵ NCA (2016). *South Sudan Annual Report*.

⁵⁶ NCA (2017). *Mali Annual Report*.

⁵⁷ NCA (2016). *Pakistan Annual Report*.

most of its efforts to build the capacity of partner organisations with regards to strengthening civil society.⁵⁸ NCA staff gave similar importance to all categories (SD=1.44), which are within a range of 4.3 percentage points, between fundraising capacity (lowest value, 11.95) and leadership, governance and/or strategic capacity (highest value, 16.33). NCA staff ranked priorities and reported activities in capacity building in exactly the same way, listing fundraising as the least important area.

Both the Zambia and South Sudan case studies clearly show the importance that partners give to fundraising capacity – the least important area for NCA staff. In the words of an NCA partner in South Sudan:

Because NCA is part of the donor community and we are implementing agencies with the ambition to get more funding, we need additional capacity building so we can meet the requirements for additional funds.

Capacity building and networking are both important for us and these two components can lead us to being exposed to other organisations. But if a potential donor wants to partner with us, they first ask us about our human resource capacity and if NCA can provide this then we can access these funds.⁵⁹

In Zambia, the JCP's main areas of training and capacity building during the period under review were finance, results and grants management, advocacy and lobbying, reporting and reporting systems, gender equity and social inclusion.

Based on KIIs, FGDs and survey data, it seems that technical support provided under the JCP in Zambia during the period under review concentrated on building capacity in compliance issues, i.e. finance and activity reporting and adherence to procurement procedures. The same can be said about the formalisation of NCA's partnership approach in Pakistan, which has revolved around providing support to strengthen partners' technical and organisational capacity to implement programmes effectively.⁶⁰

NCA's focus on compliance is consistent with findings from other sources. For example, a recent evaluation of Norwegian support to strengthen civil society in developing countries through Norwegian CSOs found that the dominant dimension of organisational support has been in building capacity in administration, finance and programme implementation. There has been far less support related to local partners' governance and accountability functions.⁶¹

The current focus on compliance has a logic behind it and could be the result of a common sequence of capacity building, whereby management capacity is strengthened first, so that advocacy can then build upon management capacity. By this line of argument, NCA's recent emphasis should be seen as

⁵⁸ The options in the e-survey were (multiple-choice; n=52): Financial, administrative and/or HR capacity; Fundraising capacity; PMER capacity; Technical and/or thematic competency; Leadership, governance and/or strategic capacity; Advocacy capacity; Networking capacity. 'I don't know' and 'Other' options not computed in the analysis.

⁵⁹ NCA South Sudan case study report.

⁶⁰ DevTrio (February 2018). *Mid-term Review of NCA Country Strategy 2016–2020*. Draft report. P.50

⁶¹ Norad (2018). *From Donors to Partners? Evaluation of Norwegian Support to Strengthen Civil Society in Developing Countries through Norwegian Civil Society Organisations*. Evaluation Department. Report 1, p.35.

the first step toward the balanced strengthening of partners' capacity in the long term. According to NCA staff in South Sudan:

We need a stronger commitment to the capacity development of partners – we need to see what their vision is and support them in that direction.⁶²

There is, however, insufficient evidence to conclude that NCA has a considered, logical sequence of this type. Partners in Zambia and South Sudan greatly appreciate the capacity-building support from NCA but felt that more could be done on an annual basis to follow this up and build upon it. They felt that a lot happened when they entered the partnership, but that this support was not consistent.

Similarly, in South Sudan, NCA's capacity building of partners was not viewed as systematic either by NCA staff or partner representatives – both identified a strong need for further systematic capacity-building support. Beyond initial capacity-building plans following the partner assessment, annual capacity-building plans have not been developed with all partners and remain ad hoc because of NCA's own capacity. Programme staff and managers indicated that further systematising of capacity building is a priority for 2019.⁶³

2.3 Roles and relationship dynamics

NCA's *Partnership Policy* outlines three main roles that NCA plays in partnerships.

- **Facilitator:** its core partners often face institutional challenges in terms of organisational capacity. NCA helps to strengthen partners' institutional sustainability so they can fulfil their role in civil society.
- **Accompanier:** its core partners often operate in fragile and politically unstable contexts, where the space for civil society is diminishing due to pressure from government, opposition groups and the private sector. NCA supports and works with civil society partners to try to protect and enhance the political space in which they can operate.
- **Challenger:** its core partners often have patriarchal and hierarchical structures that can inhibit social change. NCA engages and challenges religious leaders and faith-based institutions to play a more consistent and positive role in society.⁶⁴

In practice, NCA's role in partnerships is fluid and may change over time. The roles and relationships between NCA and its partner organisations in South Sudan varied greatly. NCA plays a sizeable role in relation to SSCC, providing a great deal of operational and programmatic support, in addition to leading the Core Group of SSCC's donors. NCA supported other partners PMER on their projects, but only on a needs basis. As outlined above, the relatively low capacity of CSOs working in South Sudan has meant that NCA works semi-operationally in most programmes.

⁶² NCA South Sudan case study report.

⁶³ SSCC is an exception and receives financial management, staffing, HR and programmatic support on an annual basis, but this is not part of the NOK 1,404,400 overall capacity-building budget for the office and is separately funded.

⁶⁴ NCA (2015). *Partnership Policy*, p.8.

Relationship dynamics

Although NCA plays a leadership role in many of its partnerships, all partners consulted in this evaluation’s survey felt they could approach NCA with any needs, concerns or challenges. Three-quarters (76%) of these respondents felt that NCA treated them as equal partners.⁶⁵ When disaggregated by years of partnership (see Figure 3), the emerging picture shows (statistically insignificant) differences among groups. Trust takes time to build on both sides of a partnership and longer-term relationships imply an adequate level of mutual trust.

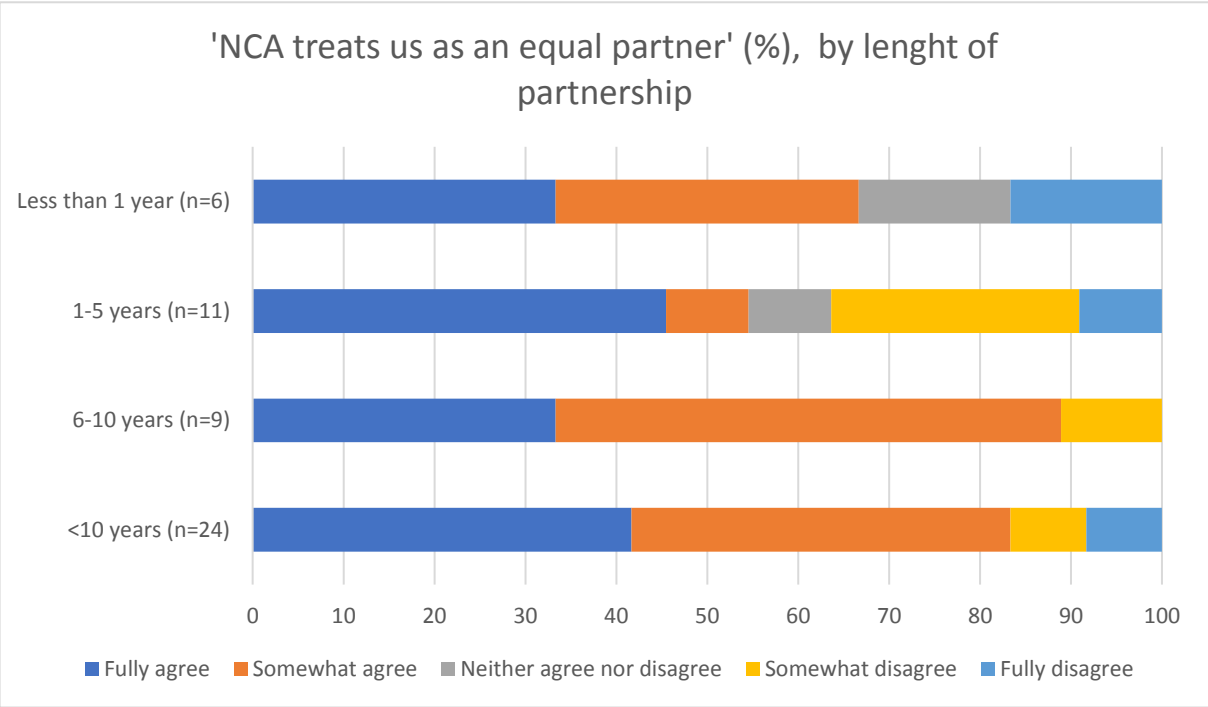


Figure 3: Partners’ perspectives on their relationship with NCA

Partners who did not think that NCA treats them as equal partners (10 responses in total)⁶⁶ represent predominantly NGOs (80%, with 20% self-identified as either an FBO or FBO and NGO). This is proportionally higher than the total survey responses from NGOs (66%). One of the respondents who felt they weren’t treated as an equal partner represent an organisation that is no longer an NCA partner.

The same e-survey asked partners to what extent NCA has met their expectations regarding building their organisational capacity to strengthen civil society. The average rate of their responses was 3.49 on a 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much) scale (n=50). Paradoxically, some of those who reported that NCA does not treat them as equal partners still reported that NCA has met their expectations in this regard.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Combined ‘fully agree’ (40%) or ‘somewhat agree’ (36%) responses (n=50).
⁶⁶ Combined ‘somewhat disagree’ or ‘fully disagree’ responses.
⁶⁷ Average scores disaggregated by years of partnership: Less than 1 year: 1; 1–5 years: 3.25; 6–10 years: 2; <10 years: 3. The one organisation that is no longer in partnership with NCA gave the lowest score (1).

Expectations, adequacy and appropriateness of support and flexibility are three main factors emerging from the Zambia case study about the dynamics of the relationship between the JCP and its partners. Most respondents felt that the JCP had largely met their expectations but stated that there was still room for improvement. For instance, most of the partners that focus on resource governance and economic empowerment stressed that the relationship had been excellent and had resulted in significant impact. Others felt that the JCP met most but not all of their expectations, such as financial support, grant management and reporting. This variation is also visible in the e-survey responses from JCP partners: on the question of success in meeting their expectations, the JCP received a score of 3.71.

As for the adequacy and appropriateness of the JCP's support, some partners believed it was adequate and that they could implement all their activities. Others felt the JCP's financial support was not always adequate, particularly in terms of lobbying and advocacy work. And others believed that the JCP's approach in relationships with its partners made their work easy. In particular, partners cited a relatively high administrative support budget compared to other donors.

In terms of flexibility in implementing partnership agreements, partners observed that JCP was more open to change than other donors. Most respondents from Zambian partners did not think that the JCP interfered inappropriately or micromanaged their operations, including their activities. Partners explained that the partnership structure did not confer a heavy burden of "*addressing donor requests*". One respondent noted, "*They give you the money and all you have is to deliver.*" Even though this was formulated in contrast to other INGOs and donors (as a positive) and can easily be interpreted as a sign of trust, it is also possible to read the statement as lack of involvement from the JCP.

JCP was applauded for convening only necessary meetings and gatherings. Partners also viewed it as open to requests for additional funding and adjustments to programmes or budgets. For example, Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection, Zambia (JCTR) asked the JCP to finance three working sessions to prepare a proposal to be submitted to the JCP. This was approved although it had not been budgeted for. The JCP also financed the Act Forum's General Conference, which was not budgeted for, and participated in the planning session for this event. Some respondents were of the view that the JCP responded to requests for changes in plans promptly – as long as the changes were within the set budget and on the core areas of intervention. In this regard, they viewed the JCP as flexible in going beyond the terms of the official partnership agreement.

A straight line connects the NCA in-country presence and meeting partners' expectations and providing them with support they deem to be adequate. To be available for partners and capable of supporting them (through training, field visits, thematically and by building coalitions, for example) calls for a conscious organisational push and allocation of resources. Management buy-in, office-wide discussions and an adequate set-up are all needed. While this evaluation cannot venture into what type of set-up is needed, it provides enough evidence to support the claim that strengthening civil society and meeting partners' needs requires an organisation that has both the capacity to support partners and a culture that is not overwhelmed by the need for short-term results.

However, one common factor in relational dynamics was highlighted by all respondents in Zambia and South Sudan – late disbursement of funds. Respondents in Zambia explained that this had been a consistent challenge that affected the implementation of activities and the expectations of their target beneficiaries. Administratively, persistent delays in the release of funds created a negative spiral – activities were implemented hurriedly, compromising the quality of activities.

In South Sudan, NCA partners also expressed concern that the short length of partner contracts (one year) drastically reduced their ability to plan and implement projects, partly because they could not guarantee long-term contracts to field staff. Partners connected the short length of contracts with a NCA’s perceived lack of trust in them.

2.4 Communication

In general, partners are positive of the communication with NCA. In Zambia, the communication channels used by the JCP have been effective. This ‘effectiveness’ was described by research participants using the following terms; *“very good, “accessible”, “comprehensive responses”, “fluent and consistent” and “warm”*. In narrating the simplicity and accessibility of these communication channels, one respondent observed, *“We simply set up an appointment and discussed the purpose and a go-ahead was given”*. In a similar vein, another said, *“Where you need to consult... you are assured of responses”*. In the same way, another partner reported being able to get a comprehensive response on their inquiry over lack of support for their emergency programme, concluding, *“We had an open discussion and they responded accordingly”*. Other partners indicated that they had regular meetings with the JCP on programmatic issues. As for the communication of training needs, this evaluation found that partners presented their training needs in programme reports submitted to the JCP.

Overall, a majority of respondents were of the view that the JCP provided feedback in good time and that the information it disseminated to partners was clear, appropriate, comprehensive and useful. Partner representatives also expressed appreciation that follow-ups were made on requests presented to programme staff. One respondent explained, *“some of the major issues are discussed during the partners’ review meeting in an open way”*. Another described the essence of the review meeting as a communication platform as: *“the partners’ meetings focus on both contextual issues and usually involve senior members of staff such as the directors and programme managers”*.

The most commonly cited communication platform was one-on-one, including face-to-face meetings and partners’ review meetings. For instance, one respondent explained that the JCP informed partners about available training opportunities and that partners are also free to request capacity-building support where necessary. Most respondents said they found partners’ review meetings helpful because they provided partners with an opportunity to share experiences and challenges encountered in implementing activities supported by the JCP. The meetings also allowed partners to get to know one another’s work, as well as the JCP itself.

In terms of communication focus, most respondents felt that content was mainly based on partnership issues such as guidelines and deadlines for submissions (administrative and bureaucratic concerns). Little of the communication between the JCP and its partners focused on contextual

subjects that affect CSOs' operations or civil society in general. Even the focus of the partners' review meetings was mainly on partnership itself rather than contextual matters. In addition, some partners believed that inadequate time was given during the reviews as the JCP invited many partners to interact and communicate within a short period of time – ultimately limiting dialogue.

Most partners in South Sudan had a positive view of communication channels with NCA. Apart from formal annual processes like partners' review meetings and monitoring visits, partners viewed informal visits, day-to-day communication via email and telephone and visits to the office as effective and positive. Some partners wished there was a more formal annual process to assess capacity needs, but in general they felt able to approach NCA with these needs informally.

One partner felt that NCA could be more transparent in terms of how funds were allocated and decision-making processes in general:

NCA and other NGOs are not transparent in their partnership with us, especially in the issue of money. I have told the former NCA country director that the money you are handling is my money from the people of Norway and we use you because you are our partner so be very transparent about it.⁶⁸

Annual partner meetings were also mentioned by NCA staff and partners as important forums to discuss progress on strengthening civil society. In line with NCA policy, a meeting should take place once a year between the NCA representative and senior programme staff, and the senior management of the partner organisation. The partner meeting is not limited to core partners and should include other types of partners as well. As per the NCA *Operations Manual*, the annual partner meeting agenda should include issues like partner updates on the country context – with a focus on the role of civil society and strategic relevance of the partner's current project portfolio, and with particular reference to the rights-based approach.⁶⁹ There are reasons to question how far this happens in reality – annual reports do not include information on this.

Some of NCA's partners in Zambia felt that the annual partner meetings are relevant because they help them to remain accountable and focused on the set goals, including performance checks that ensure "*we remain on the right path*". That being said, some partners are of the view that the annual partners' meeting is constrained by time.

The quality of NCA – partner communication partly reflects understandings of internal NCA 'identity' and 'direction' at the country level (see Section 2.1). Regular communication with partners is mainly mediated by NCA's relationship with programme staff. When different understandings of the purpose and goal of a partnership coexist, it is highly likely that that communication with partners will be determined by how staff position themselves. The form, frequency and content of the communication would not necessarily be the same when NCA staff perceives the partnership as important for strengthening civil society as if the partnership is approached from a service delivery perspective linked to achieving project milestones. In both the South Sudan and Zambia country case

⁶⁸ NCA South Sudan case study report.

⁶⁹ NCA (undated). *Operations Manual*, 5.3.2 Partnership dialogue (accountability, meetings and capacity development).

studies, this evaluation finds limited evidence of internal communication and dialogue on what strengthening civil society means and/or engagement with and strategising around civil society as a standalone issue.

2.5 Trust

NCA works in long-term partnerships with partner organisations. Mutual trust is crucial to maintaining these relationships – particularly in armed conflict in the local context. In South Sudan, all NCA partners except one expressed trusting and having mutual respect for NCA. This related to several factors, including:

- NCA’s long-term reputation in South Sudan and the commitment of its staff.
- Open communication with, and ease of access to, NCA staff.
- The feeling that NCA takes suggestions on board and is open to criticism.
- NCA’s neutrality.
- NCA shares values with many of its partners: *“Faith-based initiatives require faith-based support.”*⁷⁰

A recent mid-term review of NCA’s Pakistan country strategy also includes reflections on trust in relationships with partners. As one partner stated,

When there are partners in a project, there is a trust. We are a local NGO and we have experienced this. The relationship between donor and donee can be problematic, but if there is a partnership then it is effective. The role of NCA must be appreciated in this regard. NCA basically views its local partners as actual partners and gives them due respect.⁷¹

In Zambia, NCA’s partners have a strong sense of trust in the JCP. All the KII and FGD participants bar two said they enjoyed a “trustworthy” partnership with the JCP. Easy access to JCP staff and frequent interaction with them emerged as foundational pillars of this trusted relationship. Results from the online survey also underscore another aspect of a trust-based relationship – openness. With just one exception, all respondents agreed that the JCP has always been open about its values and the ethical standards that guide its work.

Table 4 outlines terms and phrases used in KIIs and FGDs to highlight the trust between the JCP and its partners.

Table 4: Partners’ description of trust towards the JCP

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Relates, liaises, informs and reports to partners• The partner collaboration is good• Does not plan without consulting partners• Is all-encompassing, has a good working relationship with partners• Has an open relationship with partners• Personnel are always ready for partners• Is open to new ideas and advice and we also communicate our views to them• Is one of our best partners

⁷⁰ NCA South Sudan case study report.

⁷¹ DevTrio (February 2018). *Mid-term Review of NCA Country Strategy 2016 – 2020*. Draft report.P.50

- Is down-to-earth, understands partners and what they do
- Is good at advising how can operate based on our systems and structures
- Works together with partners as a team
- Is the best funder
- Is always with us and involves local players in planning

3. How NCA plans and captures results

3.1 Planning

This evaluation did not find strong evidence of NCA strategic planning for strengthening civil society at the country strategy level. The extent to which COs address civil society in their ToCs and systematically integrate civil society into thematic programmes is not consistent across NCA's country programmes. While some thematic programmes or interventions are geared towards empowerment and mobilisation for social change, there is no evidence that this is done holistically at the country strategy level. Rather, if a thematic programme includes civil society in its work, this tends to be in isolation from other thematic programmes and does not necessarily work towards a common country-level goal.

The interviews explored what tools NCA and partner organisations' staff use in their planning processes. From the perspective of NCA Head Office, it was clear that staff felt that COs did not have a unified approach to planning.

I think we use different kinds of tools in the different programmes and at different country levels but then we don't share them.⁷²

However, both NCA (CO) and partner organisation staff agreed that the ToC was a key tool used at the beginning of a project or programme cycle. CO ToCs tended not to focus on a specific civil society objective, but rather on specific thematic programmes. NCA representatives and its partners' staff held slightly different views on how the ToC process is used to inform their results frameworks, with 74% of NCA respondents saying that they always plan outcomes, outputs and indicators based on their ToC, versus 64% of partner staff representatives stating the same.

The *South Sudan Country Strategy* does have a robust analytical focus and ToC but does not have a focus on strengthening civil society as a standalone element with its own outcomes, outputs and/or indicators. The current South Sudan country strategy seeks to “*strengthen citizens' active participation and thereby civil society for peace and equitable development*”⁷³ through a national and local approach.

At the national level, NCA's focus is on uniting the advocacy agendas of SSCC members. At the local level, community participation in peacebuilding processes, as well as local ownership and governance of these processes, are key to deepening understandings of citizenship. Importantly, as the country strategy notes, ongoing community-based processes like village water committees, parent-teacher associations and IR-VICOBA, where community members organise and self-govern “*need to be seen as development of civil society within a nascent fragile state like South Sudan*”.⁷⁴ In other words, the strategy reflects the understanding that grassroots initiatives are key to strengthening civil society, but these results are not necessarily captured in NCA annual reports (see more under section 3.2 Capturing results, below).

⁷² FGD II – NCA Head Office.

⁷³ NCA (2015). 2016–2020 South Sudan Country Strategy.

⁷⁴ NCA (2015). 2016–2020 South Sudan Country Strategy.

NCA and its partners also held contrasting views on how frequently they used a **baseline assessment** to inform intervention design. More than three-quarters (78%) of partner staff stated that they always conduct a baseline assessment at the beginning of a project or programme, versus 58% of NCA staff. However, NCA offices conduct formal or informal annual contextual analyses that form an important aspect of their annual plans, as well as a more in-depth context analysis at the beginning of each strategic period.

Together with various analytical inputs that inform planning on civil society issues, this evaluation asked NCA and its partners how often they consult **academic and practitioner literature** for best practices on strengthening civil society. For both, consulting literature was the least frequent method used to inform planning, with just 25% of partners and 10% of NCA staff stating that they always do so. This difference could be due to the ways in which programming is managed; i.e. NCA works through partners who develop concepts that are then shared with NCA.

One potentially useful area to explore further, which was not covered by this evaluation, is how far NCA staff and partner organisations share lessons learned and best practices for strengthening civil society internally (across programmes). The interviews conducted for this evaluation, both at Head Office and in-country, suggest that this does not happen very frequently.

Informants also questioned how ‘civil society-friendly’ existing NCA project proposal and project planning templates are, especially in relation to advocacy work. An NCA staff member gave the example of the challenges a CO faced when the country director tried to scale up its advocacy work:

When the time came to submit the concept note, the format [to be used] was the same as for programmatic work. When you do advocacy, the first thing you need... is... a workshop to develop a plan and you need money for that. In the template, a good two-thirds of it is irrelevant for advocacy and it is quite rigid. How we can do the funding? It could be in three phases, first small funding and then to get the second part you would need to have a good advocacy plan, and then if the implementation is good enough, you do the last part. Templates should make it easier.⁷⁵

NCA policy documents set a priority for NCA to strengthen the organisational capacity of partners as an aspect of NCA’s efforts to strengthen civil society. The Partnership Assessment tool was developed alongside the 2016–2020 Programme Plan with the aim of working more systemically to strengthen core partners as civil society actors.⁷⁶ This tool is designed for NCA and partners to set priority areas for improvement and seeks to foster “*greater mutuality in partnership*”.⁷⁷ It is also the basis for the initial assessment of new partners and the development of capacity-building plans for core partners, as outlined in NCA’s *Partnership Policy*:

NCA’s organisational and financial partnership assessment should not only be carried out before entering a partnership, but also on a regular basis so that NCA and the partners

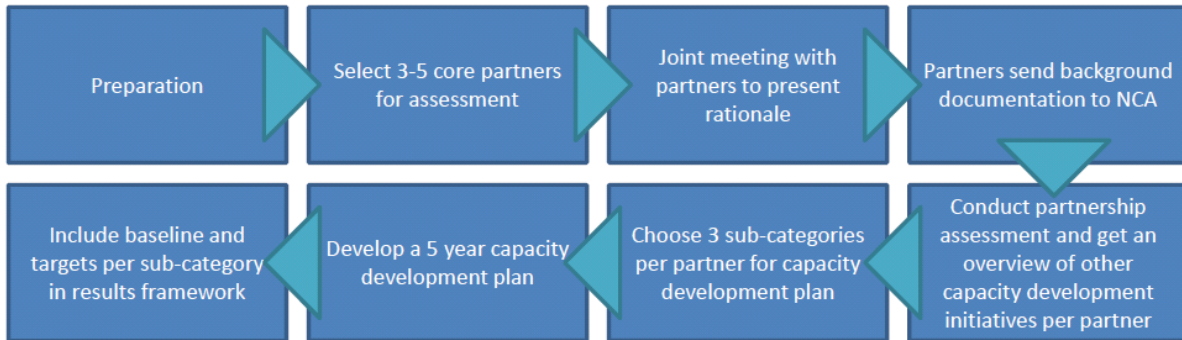
⁷⁵ KII5 – NCA Head Office.

⁷⁶ NCA (undated). *Partnership Assessment 2016–2020. Mapping of organizational, accountability, advocacy and financial capacities*. Information for NCA COs.

⁷⁷ NCA (2015). *Partnership Assessment Tool – Information Guide*.

mutually can assess the development of the partnership and their needs for capacity development. For 3–5 selected core partners NCA’s COs are required to carry out annual partnership assessments. The partner assessment should also be applied to give input to a possible [memorandum of understanding] with the partner.⁷⁸

Figure 4: Partnership capacity development process chart



As discussed earlier, NCA’s current strategy has one mandatory outcome for civil society: “NCA core partners have increased their capacity as civil society actors”. The Partnership Assessment Tool helps to document progress made against this outcome in annual reporting.⁷⁹ The vast majority (87%) of NCA CO staff participating in this evaluation said that they use the Partnership Assessment Tool at every stage of a partnership.⁸⁰ The results of assessments arising from using this tool are archived internally.

The Zambia JCP saw the need for a more comprehensive assessment of its partners early in the current strategic period (2016 – 2020) due to perceived limitations of NCA’s Partnership Assessment Tool. This process was conducted by a local NGO, Zambia Interfaith Networking Group (ZINGO), which identified the following gaps and limitations in the tool:

1. It was highly quantitative and had gaps in terms of qualifying quantitative data.⁸¹
2. It was biased towards assessing projects rather than the organisation as a whole.
3. The assessment questions were not clustered together in a seamless flow.
4. The assessment did not seem to allow for long-term capacity building.
5. It was unable to assess key components that contribute to an organisation’s sustainability, such as leadership and governance, strategic direction and organisational culture.

⁷⁸ NCA (2015). *Partnership Policy*.

⁷⁹ NCA (2015). *Partnership Assessment Tool – Information Guide*.

⁸⁰ NCA (undated). *Partnership Assessment 2016–2020. Mapping of organizational, accountability, advocacy and financial capacities*. Information for NCA COs.

⁸¹ On this point of criticism, it is worth noting the following reference from the *Partnership Assessment 2016–2020* Information for NCA COs document: “Please remember that the intention with the score is not the numbers as such”.

3.2 Capturing results

The CO annual reporting template contains a mandatory reporting section on civil society, which includes sub-sections on: civil society networks; strengthening civil society in programmes; core partners as civil society actors; and partner portfolio. This was designed to capture civil society results from thematic programmes, but in practice there is no evidence that this has been done systematically. This is partly due to the lack of a clear understanding of what constitutes civil society organisationally, as described in Part 2, Section 1, and also the lack of more robust cross-cutting outcomes in relation to civil society. As outlined above, annual partner meetings are rarely used to discuss progress on strengthening civil society. Therefore, NCA's reporting on civil society tends to focus on organisational capacity building and networks, while often missing important results at the grassroots level. As one NCA South Sudan staff member noted, *"I think the biggest challenge in the conceptualisation of civil society is that we don't have an outcome for it"*.

There is a clear example of this in South Sudan, where several outcomes or outputs from thematic programmes directly and indirectly related to strengthening civil society, but were not explicitly reported on as such:

Peacebuilding:

- Output 1.2: Women have been mobilised and organised in groups through VICOBA
- Outcome 2: Inclusive local and national level peace building structures and mechanisms prevent and transform conflicts
- Output 2.7: Peace committees in Warrap have been formed and strengthened
- Output 2.6: Councils where traditional authorities and women are included have been formed in NCA supported areas

WASH:

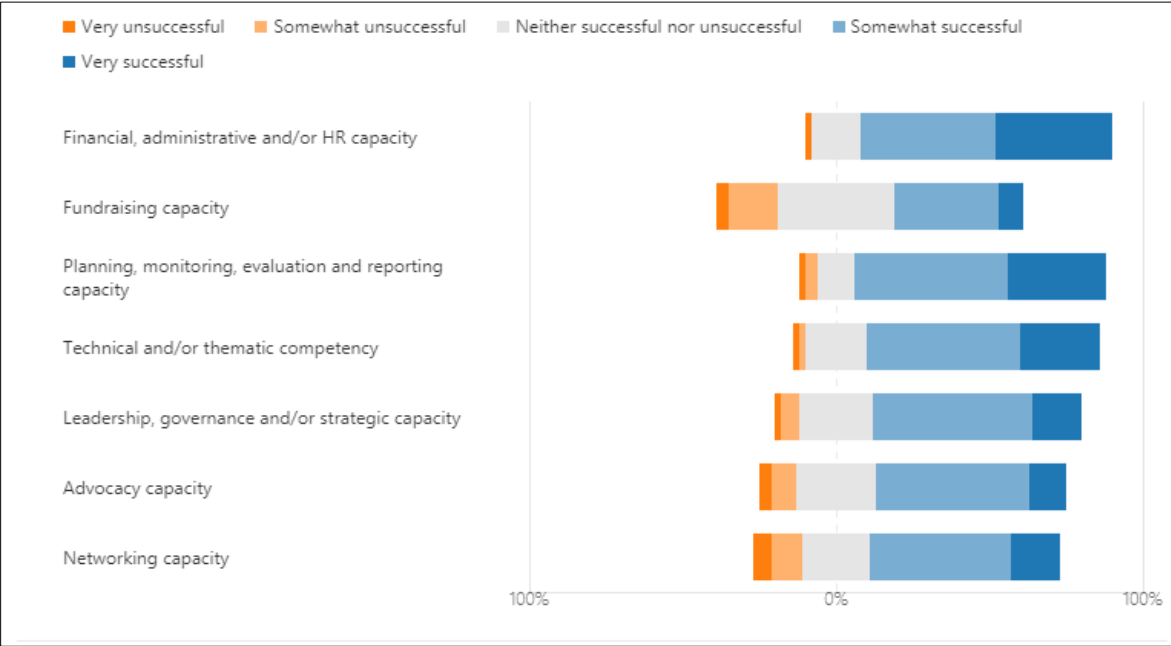
- Output 3.1: WASH committees have been established/re-established in the communities where NCA and partners operate

4. Impact

4.1 Organisational strengthening

As outlined above, building the capacity of partner organisations lies at the core of NCA’s approach to strengthening civil society. Has NCA been impactful in this respect? The following analysis focuses on the partner-centred understanding of success in strengthening civil society (see Part 2, Section 1), in both narrow (financial, programmatic) and broad senses (leadership, governance).

Figure 5 Partners’ views on NCA’s capacity-building support
"In your opinion, to what extent has NCA contributed to strengthening the capacity of your organisation in the following areas?"



NCA places considerable emphasis on strengthening partners’ capacities needed for the successful delivery of projects (such as financial, monitoring, evaluation and reporting). It is in those areas where partners around the world attribute a higher level of success to NCA. This may be linked to two related factors: high effort and low resistance. Based on in-country interviews, a desk review of documents and survey responses, the evaluation team can conclusively state that NCA has given priority to strengthening partners’ ‘project compliance’. It is also in partners’ interests to meet the formal requirements covered by this sort of capacity development. At the same time, these areas are easier to conceptualise and deliver on, and less resource-intensive, than others. It is thus unsurprising that partners report achievement in this regard.

Evidence from the country case studies supports better understanding of these responses. In terms of administration, respondents in Zambia explained that their capacity to report on activities and programmes and manage finances had improved. This improvement was closely associated with training and capacity building provided under the JCP – access and ability to use tools such as financial reporting templates, reporting guidelines and procurement manuals had enabled most partners to become more efficient and professional.

Several partners' staff members cited examples of this. One organisation's capacity to manage and report on finances had greatly improved, such that *"little time was spend correcting since the [organisation] finance manager has been well-trained in the financing systems under the JCP and there were very few audit queries as a result of the training."* In addition, the same organisation was now using these skills to manage the finances of other projects such as European Union- (EU) and German-supported interventions. Training on grant management had compelled another partner organisation to consider seeking alternative sources of financing such as the private sector.

In terms of programme support, all partner respondents were of the view that the financial, technical and material support provided under the JCP had made it possible for their organisations to implement agreed activities.

For instance, JCTR was able to implement natural resource management and policy reform work on a sustainable basis because of reliable and consistent support from the JCP. Churches Health Association of Zambia (CHAZ) managed to scale up its interventions on entrepreneurial development and even venture into related areas such as nutrition because of support from the JCP. The ability of Zambia Chamber of Small and Medium Business Associations (ZCSMBA) to influence and engage with various stakeholders on policy and developing enterprises has reportedly increased. The organisation is now represented on various government boards and committees and is involved in various private sector development initiatives supported by the international community. The Zambia National Women's Lobby's (ZNWL) election monitoring and outreach capacities have been strengthened through support from the JCP.

Another factor closely connected to enhancing programme implementation is the benefits that partners have gained through various training opportunities. For instance, partners such as ZCSMBA and Forum for Africa Women Educationalists in Zambia (FAWEZA) outlined how they have been able to mainstream gender in their programming after training on this subject. In the same vein, some partners felt that, despite the limitations discussed above, the annual partners' review meetings were relevant because they help partners to remain accountable and focused on set goals.

For other NCA partners, training in reporting and project management has translated into the efficient use of time, especially in terms of planning, developing and coordinating activities. Similarly, training in monitoring and evaluation has helped Village Water Zambia (VWZ) to be more focused on results rather than activity implementation. JCTR has been able to direct its project towards producing the desired results while the Council of Churches in Zambia (CCZ) can now effectively monitor and evaluate its programmes. Overall, partner respondents appeared to be confident in their ability to manage projects, implement activities from a results-driven perspective and monitor and evaluate these activities as a direct result of NCA's partnership support.

In South Sudan, NCA's partner organisations found these types of training very useful but wanted to build upon them on an annual basis. They reported that training from NCA was not necessarily based upon needs, but as a fulfilment of programme requirements. Therefore, both partners and NCA staff agree that a more systemic approach to capacity building is needed.

It is not only through training that organizational capacities are developed. Close interaction through activities such as monitoring visits also plays a role. In Pakistan, both NCA programme staff and NCA's partners report that monitoring field visits also help to build the capacity of partner organisations through formal and verbal feedback. These visits not only served the purpose of monitoring performance against plans but also facilitated a soft form of on-the-job training or learning by doing. This kind of mentoring is reported to have proved helpful. As one partner mentioned:

Monitoring visits were very helpful for us. Our staff did not only learn through formal training but also through the field visits. Our staff learnt from these visits... reports were shared with us and follow-ups were done both physically and virtually... This helped us learn in practical ways.⁸²

In terms of building networks, an external evaluation found that there *"has been some important initiatives from the NCA to work with their core partners in joint ecumenical efforts in Ethiopia"*.⁸³ NCA has promoted inter-partner networks in both Zambia and South Sudan. In both countries, NCA promoted collaboration between its partners, particularly during the annual partners' review meetings as partners were grouped according to specific common themes.

NCA has also facilitated working relations based on specific themes. For instance, the JCP in Zambia brought partners together and acted as 'convener' for resource governance partners. Participants explained that the JCP had played a central role in building this network, providing resources and developing joint action plans and activities. Similarly, using JCP structures, ZCSMBA built relationships with CHAZ, Daughters of Mary Immaculate (DMI) and Zambia Land Alliance (ZLA), which resulted in a multi-sectoral platform involving skills development, entrepreneurship, agriculture and disaster management.

JCP in Zambia has also facilitated international linkages. For instance, CHAZ, with support from the JCP, visited a partner focusing on nutrition in Malawi. Lessons learnt during that visit had been helpful in the development of CHAZ's current nutrition programme in Zambia. According to the majority of the respondents, organisational strengthening has been attained largely because of NCA's effective partnership approach and the good quality and levels of knowledge gained during various training and capacity-building opportunities. In South Sudan, NCA's partners valued its role in connecting them to larger networks:

NCA has helped us network with agencies and other partners for advocacy for conflict resolution within IGAD [Intergovernmental Authority on Development] with other faith-based organisations.⁸⁴

However, respondents also highlighted a few challenges in organisational strengthening during the period under review. In South Sudan, apart from annual partner meetings, partners' networking with larger processes or bodies was ad hoc and typically at the request of the partners. Some Zambian

⁸² DevTrio (February 2018). *Mid-term Review of NCA Country Strategy 2016–2020*. Draft report. P.15.

⁸³ Norad (2018). *From Donors to Partners? Evaluation of Norwegian Support to Strengthen Civil Society in Developing Countries through Norwegian Civil Society Organisations*. Evaluation Department. Report 1. P.44.

⁸⁴ NCA South Sudan case study report.

respondents felt that networking and coalition building constituted one of the JCP's major weaknesses, particularly in terms of local exchange visits and peer learning. They pointed out that, unlike the EU, the JCP did not have a CSO platform that brings together both JCP partners and other likeminded CSOs outside the JCP partner portfolio.

For some Zambian respondents, the JCP has focused much more on strengthening capacities in single areas, and assessing plans and programmes, rather than focusing on how CSOs could have an impact on the ground. Consequently, they recommended promoting community-based interventions, as expressed by a staff member from one partner organisation:

We need to redefine how we are looking at development and human resources. Donor demands are pulling us away from our values... our focus is mainly on thematic reviews, results frameworks. What is the impact? Should [our organisation] be responsible for the results of someone else? We need to rethink our role and value systems to inform our programmes.⁸⁵

Another constraining factor relates to the limited time available for strategic thinking on how to strengthen civil society, as day-to-day managerial and project needs dominate. This is the case both within and between the JCP and its partner organisations.

4.2 Broadening impact

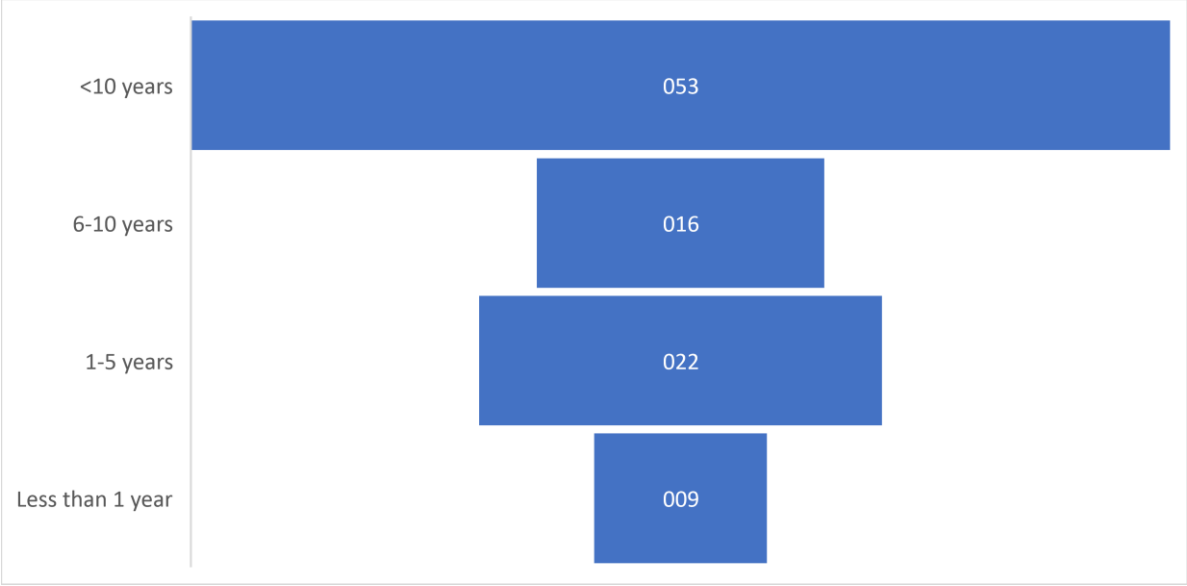
When asked about how successful they think NCA has been in strengthening civil society in their countries, partners rated NCA as 3.72 on a scale of 1 (very unsuccessful) to 5 (very successful).⁸⁶

When disaggregated by years of partnership, it becomes evident that those who have been partners to NCA for more than 10 years have the most positive view on this (see Figure 6).

⁸⁵ DevTrio (February 2018). *Mid-term Review of NCA Country Strategy 2016–2020*. Draft report. P.50

⁸⁶ As with meeting expectations, some respondents who did not believe NCA treats them as equal partners still credited NCA with being successful in strengthening civil society. Average scores disaggregated by years of partnership: Less than 1 year: 2; 1–5 years: 4; 6–10 years: 2; <10 years: 3.75.

Figure 6 High perception of NCA's success in strengthening civil society among partners (%), by length of partnership with NCA⁸⁷



NCA partners have a more positive assessment than NCA itself. In response to the same question, NCA staff rated the organisation as 3.23. When disaggregated by years working at NCA, perceptions of success are inversely proportional to years in the organisation (see Figure 7). The understanding of what success means (see Part 2, Section 1) might have influenced the degree of success that each partner credits to NCA.

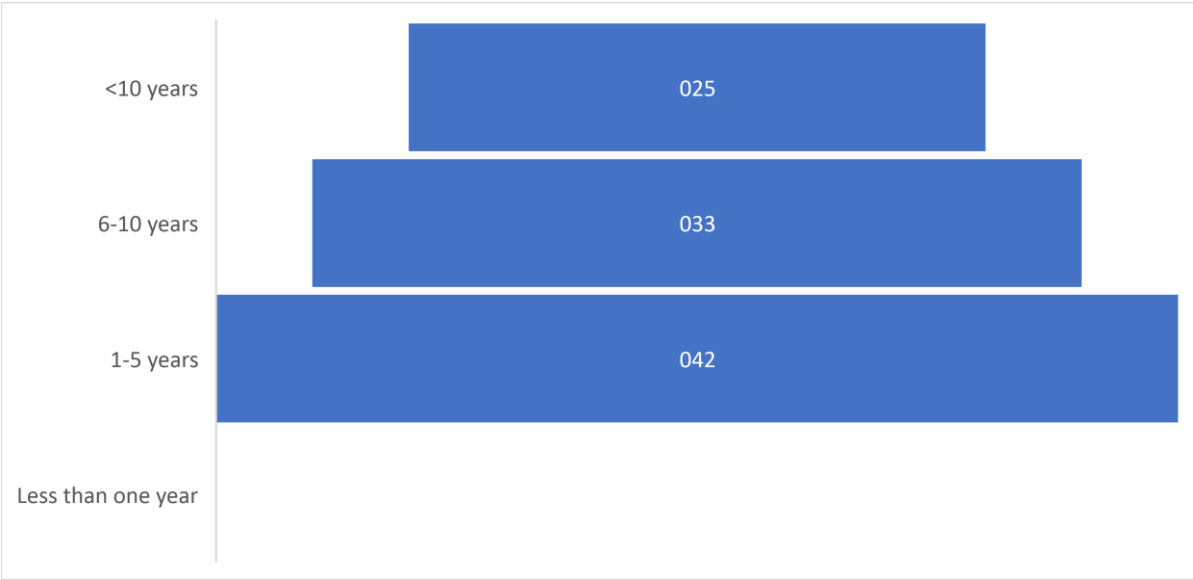


Figure 7 High perception of NCA's success in strengthening civil society among NCA staff(%), by years worked at NCA

Empowerment

The Zambia and South Sudan case studies provide evidence of NCA’s contribution – through partners – to facilitating community mobilisation and empowerment. In South Sudan, the formation of village-level civil society structures like *Boma* councils, village water committees, inter-church committees,

⁸⁷ Responses including scores of 4 and 5.

IR-VICOBA, parent-teacher associations and peace committees as a result of NCA's partnership with CSOs has empowered communities to hold local leadership to account. Although these structures are not always described as 'civil society', they form a crucial aspect of NCA's vision for strengthening civil society in South Sudan. Community participation in peacebuilding processes, as well as local ownership and governance of these processes, are seen as key to deepening understandings of citizenship. As NCA's *South Sudan Country Strategy* notes, these local structures "need to be seen as a development of civil society within a nascent fragile state like South Sudan".⁸⁸

JCP partners in Zambia working on natural resource management have used a coordinated and collaborative approach to provide information and increase public interest in the topic. This has resulted in increased community demands to benefit from mining resources. Furthermore, this approach has built the capacity of local communities to engage directly with government on natural resource management. For example, this support has enabled JCTR to mobilise local communities to take responsibility for the lobbying and advocacy activities around this issue. FAWEZA witnessed a significant drop in the level of pregnancies and school absenteeism among girls as a result of its community interventions on reproductive health and rights as well as WASH. Support from the JCP enabled CHAZ to upgrade its interventions from forming saving groups to creating entrepreneurial groups.

But one respondent argued that most JCP-supported projects, especially in rural areas, are not necessarily changing the situation on the ground – largely because local communities were heavily dependent on government handouts. According to this respondent, instead of local communities yearning for knowledge and skills, most were more interested in receiving monetary and material support but these were not sustainable and rarely resulted in real empowerment⁸⁹.

Space

In South Sudan, NCA has contributed to building networks of like-minded CSOs to increase the impact of their work. NCA has taken a leadership role in the ACT Forum for South Sudan, as well as the Caritas network. It is also the lead in the Core Group of donors to the SSCC. NCA's participation in these networks provides like-minded partner organisations with the opportunity to set common advocacy agendas and also provides access to high-level decision-making bodies like IGAD. The coordination of these networks around the shared goals of the SSCC Action Plan for Peace (APP) has helped this plan to get support from both the government and the political opposition.

Similarly, NCA has played a central role in ensuring that SSCC member churches are working with a shared goal in terms of the APP, giving SSCC and its members more credibility when dealing with both government and opposition groups. Additionally, the significant work that NCA has done to continue building SSCC's capacity has helped professionalise the council in terms of both operations and accountability.

In Zambia, some JCP partners observed that the programme had brought together various CSOs, enabling them to have greater impact. For example, organisations that were receiving economic

⁸⁸ NCA (2015) *2016–2020 South Sudan Country Strategy*.

⁸⁹ NCA South Sudan case study report.

empowerment support had created stronger working ties with government. Some, such as ZCSMBA, were represented in various government initiatives such as the Rural Empowerment Fund and the Ministry of Agriculture. Others, such as CCZ, have good working relations with the government, mining companies, other CSOs and local communities. JCTR had built relationships with various strategic actors such as parliamentarians and policy-makers. And CHAZ had avoided operational challenges partly because of its good working relations with government.

System-institutional change

Under the resource governance programme specifically, JCP and its partners have established coalitions that include some non-JCP partners. These coalitions have worked with individual change actors and shaped public debates and policies at the regional level. This has led to significant positive changes in both the government policy position and mining operations (corporate social responsibility) as well as significant changes to the law in Zambia on public finance management. Moreover, its work has shown impact at regional dimension through the Alternative Mining Indaba⁹⁰.

The assessment of the resource governance programme highlights the following enabling factors that may have wider application in strengthening civil society:

- Long(er) time horizon, beyond the 1-4 years that usual project cycle life.
- Active NCA staff engagement: time, technical support, solving problems together
- A combination of partners (FBOs working with non-FBOs)
- A coalition of actors
- Horizontal and vertical networks, connecting actors locally, nationally and regionally
- Strengthening partners (monitoring, reporting, technical training, etc.)
- Collaborative advocacy
- Research into programme effectiveness and evidence for advocacy
- Flexibility on the NCA side (to requests for rescheduling activities)⁹¹

However, the impact of the JCP's work on the wider civil society landscape and democratic governance is generally limited. This is mainly because of challenges associated with the state and operational context of CSOs in Zambia. The flourishing of CSOs has been constrained by unfavourable legal and political conditions and reduced donor support. And most of these CSOs are still heavily dependent on external funding, have weak governance systems, and are politically divided and weakly represented at constituency level. In addition, only a few JCP partners seem to have strong working linkages with other CSO actors operating in the civic space in Zambia.

⁹⁰ <http://altminingindaba.co.za>

⁹¹ Interestingly, a key informant (KII8 – NCA Head Office) listed virtually all of these enabling factors when referring to examples of successful experiences of NCA strengthening civil society in Brazil.

PART THREE

1. Conclusions

There is no common understanding within NCA of what civil society is or does, either in Head Office or at CO level. Even though policy documents lay out what civil society is by following a broadly accepted characterisation and providing some illustration, its definition is not settled. Far from it. Within NCA, an 'organisation-centric' view of civil society coexists with a view of it as an 'arena' that includes a broad scope of formal and informal interest groups.

There is a correlation between longevity of employment at NCA, involvement with its field offices and the type of role(s) held by staff at Head Office and their view on civil society. Those who were employed by NCA during the 2010–2015 strategic period or longer tended to have a broader view of civil society. In a way, this multi-faceted understanding is an extension of an unresolved issue in NCA policy documents, with abrupt jumps from a broad understanding of civil society to NCA's partnership approach to strengthening it.

Within NCA, understanding of what success in strengthening civil society looks like also varies – and policy documents say little about this. Interestingly, NCA's partners have a far more organisation-centric outlook on success than NCA staff, which has several yardsticks.

Against that backdrop, the operationalisation of NCA's work on strengthening civil society has focused on building the capacity of partner organisations – strengthening and empowering them as civil society actors. NCA core partners deliver projects, so are expected to have the necessary financial, administrative and technical capacity to deliver quality outputs in a timely, efficient, effective and responsible manner. At the same time, core partners are not merely service providers but agents for change who behave in accordance with certain norms. It is through partners that NCA expects to mobilise rights-holders at large. In order to perform that function, partners need appropriate capacity in certain areas.

After using NCA's Partnership Assessment Tool to identify existing capacities, NCA and each partner jointly identify areas that could be strengthened. This evaluation found that these capacity assistance efforts and understandings are skewed, favouring programme compliance elements more than other elements. There is a powerful argument for investing in building partners' capacities to ensure that NCA complies with donor contractual requirements and its own minimum standards.

But there is also evidence showing that more systematic work could be done on strengthening partners on a broader organisational level, to ensure knowledge adoption, good governance, ability to network and advocate at different levels and to ensure financial stability and sustainability. In terms of the latter, building fundraising capacity is among the most requested assistance from NCA's partners but the area least prioritised by NCA itself.

Overall, NCA's partners are highly appreciative of the support it provides. Three-quarters (76%) of those consulted in the e-survey considered that NCA treats them as equal partners. NCA enjoys the trust of its partners, who speak of NCA's openness, respect and flexibility – perceptions verified by the evaluation team in South Sudan and Zambia. Some of the factors contributing to these high levels of trust are: NCA's long-term presence and continuity; open communication and ease of access; including partners in its planning processes; the feeling that NCA takes suggestions on board and is open to criticism; and shared values. Partners also greatly value NCA's follow-up and availability.

There is a straight line between NCA in-country presence and meeting partners' expectations and providing them with adequate support. To be available for partners and capable of supporting them (through training, field visits, thematically and in building coalitions, for example) calls for a conscious effort and allocation of resources – management encouragement, office-wide discussions on strengthening civil society and an adequate organisational set-up are key.

How far NCA COs place strengthening civil society at the centre of their ToCs and strategies depends on internal factors (staff in the office and management pressure) as well as external ones (level of conflict and space for civic action in their operational context).

Results capturing is where NCA misses out. There is plenty of evidence suggesting that NCA does a significant work to strengthen civil society but its monitoring and reporting tools do not capture these results adequately.

This evaluation has found compelling evidence that NCA meets its partners' expectations *and* has a positive effect on strengthening them. NCA has contributed to strengthening civil society at an organisational level and also beyond that. Partners report that NCA has been successful in strengthening civil society in their countries – scored as 3.72 rate on a scale of 1 (very unsuccessful) to 5 (very successful). This evaluation has documented scattered examples of NCA's impact in empowering communities, creating and occupying spaces in which civil society actors can interact with each other and duty bearers, and supporting transformational change within partners' societies. However, the extent to which those results are achieved at scale seems to be limited.

No matter how success in strengthening civil society is defined, collaboration is always a common enabler. NCA partners achieve the most when they analyse and strategise together and build on each other's strengths. This collaboration can take many forms, from joint contextual analyses to using the legitimacy some actors have (such as FBOs) or the networks and entry points some organisations have with different duty bearers to synergise efforts in coalitions and alliances. The latter are, however, slow processes that require nurturing over time so it is not easy to immediately see a quick return on investment.

There are also challenges and limitations in NCA's efforts to strengthen civil society. Partner-centered activities have not always reached a transformational effect at the organisational level. Moreover, there is a risk of this capacity-strengthening approach becoming routinised and of NCA (and partners) losing sight of the bigger picture: what type of civil society exists in the operational context and how it can be strengthened to seek justice and achieve transformational change. In the absence of proper planning, coalition-building and a long-term perspective the impact of NCA's strengthening efforts beyond its organizational partnerships is rather limited.

2. Recommendations

Considering the findings from this evaluation, the following recommendations could reduce the gap between policy and practice and expand the reach and impact of NCA's work to strengthen civil society.

1. **Revise NCA's *Partnership Policy* and include additional guidance on how to operationalise strengthening civil society.** Consider the different understandings of both civil society and success in strengthening it, as well as context-specific challenges outlined in this evaluation report. Having a single, narrow definition of civil society that NCA and partners can agree on is neither possible nor desirable. It would be better to have space for contextualisation and for different views to coexist. There is, however, a need for continuous dialogue around these definitions and strategic reflections on where NCA stands, both at Head Office and in the countries where it has a presence.

These shifts should also consider and rethink the relevance of partnership modalities, in close coordination with COs. Additionally, NCA should create a robust guidance paper on how COs and partner organisation staff can operationalise NCA's revised partnership policy, including clarifying complex terms through examples.

2. **Take a systematic and broad (but nuanced) approach to capacity assessment and developing the capacity of partners, in line with partners' own needs to fulfil their vision and the ToC.** Funding capacity is an area to which partners attach great importance. Strengthening partners should not only focus on building their grant management capacities but also consider other areas including those relating to a rights-based approach, organisational leadership and governance, and common platforms and networking.

Furthermore, organisational capacities are built not only via training but also by working closely together over time. NCA COs should assess their current organisational set-up and consider what resources are needed to support effective strengthening of civil society. For example, this might include creating a new advocacy position or mainstreaming a key function.

Finally, strengthening civil society takes time. As far as possible, NCA should opt for long-term partner funding and contracts and sufficient administrative costs to support partner organisations as this has an impact on their ability to function as civil society actors (even if they don't self-identify as such).

3. **Conduct a thorough review of planning and reporting tools and update them.** NCA should revisit the Partnership Assessment Tool, tacking stock of country experiences of using it – some possible limitations were found in Zambia, for instance. NCA's templates for concept notes and project development steps should also be reviewed to make sure they cover advocacy initiatives. NCA's templates and system for reporting on results should also be reviewed – and staff made aware of how to capture results relating to civil society.
4. **Generate spaces for candid reflection to encourage strategic thinking and novel approaches to strengthening civil society.** NCA staff should periodically take a step back to think about the civil society space, democratic governance and strengthening civil society in a given country. NCA and its partner organisations should have similar discussions, beyond the scope of project delivery or a specific thematic programme. NCA should make sure the annual partner meeting mechanism is

conducive to that sort of discussion and consider the possibility of establishing breakfast meetings or other forms of informal, bilateral or multilateral dialogue between the Country Director and partner organisations' directors.

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