



Working paper

Nurturing civil society in Small Island Developing States (SIDS)

How can civic space be expanded and strengthened for greater inclusion, equity and empowerment?

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Abstract

Developing ‘strong’ institutions, enhancing citizen participation and building civil society is crucial for development in Small Island Developing States (SIDS), having many positive impacts in relation to environmental justice, human rights, conflict alleviation, health and well-being, food and energy security and gendered inequalities. However, civil society is under threat from multiple sources, including increasingly constrained and restrictive civic space, tensions over the role of civil society (as a delivery partner, watchdog or critical voice) and an increasingly challenging financial landscape. Supporting civil society is, then, increasingly pressing. However, there is much debate about how to effectively support civil society, particularly in small-island contexts. Synthesising the literature on civil society in SIDS with the evidence on civil society strengthening demonstrates the complexities of building ‘stronger’ civil societies. By drawing across these two literatures, the paper concludes with three key recommendations that act as starting points for thinking about building civil society in SIDS: 1) cross-SIDS network building; 2) capacity development for ‘critical’ voices and 3) support for youth organising.



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About this paper

This is one of 12 papers commissioned for the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) Future Forum, co-hosted by RESI and Island Innovation, alongside partners UN-OHRLLS, UNDESA, UKAid and AOSIS.

In each paper, a leading expert analyses one of five themes identified in the preparatory documents for the UN's Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS4) in May 2024. The papers will contribute to SIDS4 as supporting material/annexes to the next 10-year roadmap for SIDS, the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS.

This paper was commissioned under the theme of 'Safe societies: Forging a path to empowerment, equity, inclusion, peaceful societies and safe communities.'

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Acronyms/Glossary

CCWG Caribbean Consultative Working Group

CSO civil society organisation

NGO non-governmental organisation

SIDS Small Island Developing States

1 Introduction

Civil society is an important facet of social, civic and political life in many Small Island Developing States (SIDS), with contemporary associational life often shaped by historical forms of organising – and more recently through engagement with the global development industry (Peck, 2022).

Research has shown the importance of civil society for global development through positive impacts on environmental justice, human rights, conflict alleviation, health and well-being, food and energy security and gendered inequalities. Evidence also suggests that civil society organisations (CSOs) can expand services to marginalised groups, providing ‘much-needed services to individuals, communities, and society in general’ (Bowen, 2013: 81). There is, then, a presumed link between a ‘strong’ civil society and enhanced development outcomes.

Simultaneously, the space for civil society in many states is becoming more constrained, with increased levels of governmental oversight and both legal and extra-legal practices deployed to curtail the activities of civil society organisations. Crucially, tensions often emerge over the anticipated or desired role of civil society – states sometimes view civil society as a development delivery partner, rather than as a critical watchdog or space for dissent (Hammett and Jackson, 2018).

Developing ‘strong’ institutions and enhancing citizen participation is key, yet the process of how best to strengthen civil society remains unclear. Strategies to date have often focused on building the capacity of civil society organisations to become more ‘effective’ development actors (often associated with managing projects and budgets more effectively). Evidence to support the long-term effectiveness of these approaches is limited. A key question, which this paper addresses, remains: how can civil society in SIDS be nurtured with the aim of fostering more inclusive, equitable and just societies considering the contemporary particularities of civil society, civic space and the developmental challenges in small island societies and environments?

The paper will proceed as follows. It will begin by providing a brief introduction to civil society in the global development context, before moving on to a discussion of the character and landscape of civil society within SIDS. Synthesising the literature on civil society strengthening, and drawing on empirical evidence from Barbados, Grenada and Singapore, the paper concludes with three key recommendations for nurturing civil society in SIDS; firstly, cross-SIDS network building; secondly, capacity building for ‘critical’ voices; and finally, support for youth organising.

2 Methods

This paper is drawn from two sources of evidence: firstly, empirical material from the authors' in-depth research and engagement with civil society groups in Barbados, Grenada and Singapore (as well as in non-SIDS including Rwanda and Uganda); and secondly, evidence from a systematic literature review on civil society and civil society strengthening in small island states, including analysis of publicly available grey material, academic literature and policy documents.

3 Civil society for global development

Civil society, and wider civic space, is a key element of global development. Civil society often refers to ‘formal NGOs and CSOs, often aid – or foreign-funded, involved in service delivery or undertaking a “watchdog” function by holding government and other actors to account. [However], civil society is properly viewed as a broader category of actors that includes the independent media; human rights defenders; professional associations; academia and thinktanks; and social movements such as land and indigenous people’s rights groups, women’s and peasant movements, labour organizations, environmental activists, as well as grassroots and community-based organizations’ (Hossein et al., 2019: 9). Civic space can be understood as ‘the political, legislative, social and economic environment which enables citizens to come together, share their interests and concerns and act individually and collectively to influence and shape their societies’ (Civic Space Watch, 2021). Thus, civil society is crucially focused on and grounded in the power of the public, rather than the economic power of the market or political power of the state.

3.1 Key characteristics of civil society

- striving for public interest rather than private interests
- independence (from state and market)
- flexibility (in actions, approaches, concerns)
- the capacity to act in various roles
- an ability to respond dynamically to changing circumstances
- accountability to the community they represent
- a focus on improving the accountability, efficiency and effectiveness of the political sphere

Presumed to represent marginalised voices, civil society has become integral to global development. Donors view the presence of a strong civil society (and a socio-political environment supportive of an open and critical civil society) not only as contributing to good governance but as an indicator of national political and economic stability – and so, in turn, a sign of a good business environment. Thus, civil society (organisations) are seen as being:

- key promoters of democratisation
- key agents in improving transparency and accountability among ruling elites
- key service delivery partners, particularly for ensuring services reach marginalised and difficult-to-reach population groups
- key advocates for and partners in realising the Sustainable Development Goals
- key actors to ensure appropriate monitoring and evaluation of development projects and government budget allocation and expenditure.

Despite this positive emphasis, civil society and CSOs also remain the subject of much conjecture, criticised for neoliberal tendencies and co-option by the state. At the same time, it should be

recognised that civil society may also be regressive and/or conservative. A key challenge for states (and the civil society sector) is recognising these tendencies and providing appropriate space for differing approaches, views and opinions to be expressed. Moreover, the current ‘paradigm of civil society participation’ (Rombouts, 2006) assumes that all marginalised groups are adequately and equally represented by civil society, denying the impacts of intersectional inequalities on civic participation; that there is broad and peaceful agreement by CSOs on priorities and policies; that CSOs have the same technical and other skills and resources as other stakeholders; and that there is a neutrality of power. The dominance of these assumptions presents key challenges.

4 Civil society and civic space in Small Island Developing States

Civil society has an extensive and diverse history in many SIDS, which has emerged from historical contexts and processes that differ from dominant understandings of civil society and civic space (Gomes Lopes, 2023; Lewis-Cameron and Brown-Williams, 2023). The contemporary civil society sector in many SIDS comprises a diverse number of groups and individuals, with varying structures, working practices, financial support and ideologies. Many groups are community-based, with some working at a national and regional scale, or advocating for the sector more widely (Mohanty, 2011; Peck, 2022). These may be accompanied by international NGOs, often working in partnership with more local groups (Bowen, 2013; Mohanty, 2011; Peck, 2022).

With often small public sectors, research shows that civil society in SIDS engages with a diverse range of concerns – often at multiple scales – including health and well-being, environmental justice and conservation, regional integration, gendered and racialised inequalities, food and energy security, concerns related to illicit finance, social justice, political empowerment, human rights, reparative justice, education, poverty alleviation and disaster risk management (Campling, 2006; Chaney, 2022; Hinds Harrison, 2014; Hinds, 2019; Mohanty, 2011; Pintard-Newry, 2018; Poiohia et al., 2022).

Despite these activities, civil society in many SIDS is considered as ‘comparatively less developed’ and the civic spaces and regulatory environments in which they operate are thought to be under increasing threat. Civil society in many SIDS is described as under-valued and marginalised (Andrew et al., 2023; Lewis-Cameron and Brown-Williams, 2023). Adopting Miller et al.’s (2009) five-part typology of civil society spaces (contentious, manipulated, disciplined, competitive, repressive) we see a diversity of these contexts across different SIDS – and, crucially, the risk that increasing numbers of contexts are sliding towards repressive, contentious or manipulated environments. Meanwhile, the competitive civil society landscape in other SIDS presents a different set of challenges relating to resources, time, energy, priorities and a weak civic associationalism (Bowen, 2013).

Whilst recognising their heterogeneities, civil society and civic space in many SIDS face several intersecting and unique challenges to their work, and the nuances of operating in small-island contexts need to be carefully considered. Two key challenges, the civic landscape and resource mobilisation, are detailed on page 6.

4.1 The civic landscape

The majority of SIDS are described as having ‘open’ or ‘narrowed’ civic space (CIVICUS Monitor, 2023). Whilst there is celebration of the democratic nature of many SIDS, this is tempered by concerns about the limits of civic space within SIDS, particularly authoritarian tendencies and the capture of power and civic ‘norms’ by elite actors (Baldacchino, 2012; Briguglio et al., 2023; Hinds, 2019; Grenade, 2011; Grugel, 1995; Veenendaal and Corbett, 2020). There are also concerns about risks of compliance, conservatism, restrictive ideas of ‘civility’ and patronage and bipartisan politics in SIDS (Corbett, 2015; Hammett and Jackson, 2018; Sanches et al., 2022) and the potential for civil society to act as an exclusionary space along (sometimes intersecting) ethnic, gendered and socio-economic lines and to reproduce intersectional inequalities (Laville, 2000; Srebrnik, 2000; 2004).

With a limited distance and distinction between civil society and the state in SIDS, elites can hold tight control, enabling them to collect information on civic activities and tarnish the reputations of civil society activists by labelling them ‘anti-government’ or ‘anti-development’ (Kasanawaqa et al., 2023; Srebrnik, 2004; Williams, 2023). These interpersonal relationships and the lack of anonymity in public affairs is significant for the development of civil society, particularly spaces for critical voices and debates (Oppong, 2016; Peck, 2017).

A further challenge for civil society organisations is the navigation of boundaries of expected or accepted behaviour. This is particularly pronounced in contexts where the state holds a specific view of what civil society ought to do (which is, often, to support the state in service delivery and other functions). In some contexts, these expectations are increasingly rooted in legislative framings and the (extra-)legal surveillance of such organisations by the state. Strict – if unspoken – ‘red lines’ are used to demarcate topics or issues that are ‘out of bounds’ for civil society (including media) to engage with: for example, in Singapore, which has notably been silencing criticisms of the state and political leaders (Hammett and Jackson, 2018).

There is, then, a need to be cautious about the changing nature of civic space in many SIDS. While civil society is ‘very much alive’ (Hinds, 2019: 4) in many SIDS, there is a need to understand the complexities of the civic landscape and the organisations themselves. The rise of digital civic space, and the restrictions that can be placed on the digital sphere (as well as its inherent limitations) are increasingly important in the global development context (Armstrong and Hinds, 2019; Ochieng-Springer and Francis, 2019).

4.2 Mobilising civic resources

Changes in the global economy, alterations in aid architecture, the rise of private sector actors and the securitisation of development have placed CSOs in positions of multiple and increasing vulnerabilities. One concern is the financial landscape in which CSOs in SIDS are now required

to operate. Many have experienced (often problematic) dependency on international donor funding, and subsequent decreases in the amount of such funding available to them, alongside increasing bureaucratisation and regulation of any funds received.

The retreat of traditional donors places greater emphasis on a diversity of funding sources for civil society groups.¹ In Barbados and Grenada, for example, civil society groups are responding to changes in the donor landscape by actively creating diverse financial networks (including relations with local businesses and philanthropists, crowd-sourcing, and ‘voluntourism’) to sustain their work. This can present new challenges: for example, continued precarity and reliance on civic reputation and connections (Peck, 2020; 2022).

Civil society in SIDS is also vulnerable due to limited social resources, with small populations to draw from, limited resources and significant outmigration. This means that civic organising can fall on to the shoulders of a few, threatening the longevity of such organising and producing a context in which prominent individuals are seen to be ‘experts’ on an issue of significance, with singular voices imbued with power and authority, rather than opening up spaces for debate (Andrew et al., 2023). Organisations may struggle with only a small number of key staff, high staff turnover and subsequent loss of expertise and resources. However, civil society groups do draw on varied social connections to sustain their work: for example, through connections with diaspora populations (Mohanty, 2011; Peck, 2020; 2022).

Civil society in SIDS is at a critical juncture, under threat from changes in aid architecture and a narrowing of civic space, yet also increasingly crucial in the fight for social and environmental justice in regions characterised by geopolitical vulnerability, economic volatility and acute environmental challenges. The specific ‘small-island’ context is implicit in much civil society work in SIDS, shaping development challenges, wider political governance systems, regulatory environments and the way civil society groups gain support. The key question to consider here is: how can civil society be nurtured in these small-island contexts?

1 See: Cieslik (2016); Hailey and Salway (2016); Mendonca et al. (2016).

5 Approaches to strengthening civil society

Civil society strengthening and capacity building has been seen as a core objective for global development. This has involved several approaches, three of which will be considered here: firstly, network development; secondly, capacity building; and finally, youth organising. There is inconsistent evidence for each of these strategies, particularly in SIDS.

5.1 Network development

One aspect of strengthening civil society has been a focus on building civil society networks and finding synergies between organisations. Civil society in many SIDS has a long history of being involved in cross-border organising, and continues to be involved in various global and regional networks and island-to-island connections. Regional movements have a substantial history in many SIDS: for example, feminist movements, environmental movements and campaigns against nuclear testing (Naidu and Slatter, 2023). There is evidence, then, of the potential of island-to-island connections for transforming civil society. Such connections have been praised for offering multi-focal opportunities, such as camaraderie, shared experiences, support and solidarity, which are all important constructs for civil society organising, with one civil society actor in Grenada describing regional civil society meetings as ‘integral to her growth as an activist’ and ‘a university without walls’ (Peck, 2022: 125). Connections between islands appear to be a way of sustaining resources and enhancing the prospect of success, making prolonged civic engagement more likely. Encounters between civil society groups across islands can therefore be generative of new ideas, act as opportunities for learning and sharing of knowledge and resources, and enhance political consciousness (Peck, 2022).

Networks support individual activists – and in the potentially atomised and exposing landscape of civil society in SIDS, they are important for sustaining activism. Voices are likely to be stronger together; civic actors can work collaboratively in the face of global power structures (Campling, 2006; Moloney, 2020). As with intergovernmental regional networks, the potential to resist powerful outside interests and produce forms of solidarity is potent through transnational civil society networks (Naidu and Slatter, 2023). Networks can also help to counter elite capture of civil society and the placing of authority solely within prominent individuals. In the Caribbean it is suggested that the CARICOM agenda has provided a stimulus for regional civil society, with regional groupings attempting to enhance their reach and influence, and (simultaneously) facilitate the work of individual organisations (Bowen, 2013; Hinds, 2019). There have, then, been efforts to make regional processes more inclusive of civil society, yet Hinds critiques the infrastructure for sustained civil society engagement within CARICOM, with engagement often

seen as consultatory or on ‘a case-by-case basis’ (Hinds, 2019: 96) There are also significant barriers to SIDS networking, including the financial and social resources required, as well as tensions, inequalities and competition between organisations (Campling, 2006).

While networks can indeed be fraught with tensions, inequalities, and the demands of a competitive civil society sector, Naidu and Slatter (2023) make a clear case for the relevance of regional networks for civil society organising. In a case study of three regional movements in the Pacific region (the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (NFIP) movement, the Pacific Women’s Network Against Violence Against Women and a regional campaign against deep-sea mining), they articulate the successes of these regional movements in policy advocacy, raising public and media awareness and supporting localised campaigns. Inspired by common goals and working through regional conferences and online connections, these case studies demonstrate the potential of civil society networks.

Such network building, in conjunction with capacity building (see later), may also prove a useful counter to the fragility of income streams and dependency on the vagaries of international donor funding through the potential for collective pooling of resources to apply for funding, to lobby donors for longer-term and/or less tied support, or in mutual support with staffing and training. While individual governments may have limited agency, the creation of open and supportive legislative environments for civil society within and across SIDS would facilitate these practices.

5.2 Capacity building

A key element of strengthening civil society has been a focus on building the capacity of individual organisations. Capacity-building approaches can take the form of training and mentoring sessions directed towards individuals and organisations – for example, the NGO Professional Management certificate offered by the University of the West Indies Open Campus and the Caribbean Policy Development Centre, covering organisational and project management (see UWI (2023) for more details on the content of the programme). There is also evidence of mentoring programmes for CSOs: for example, the ASPIRE Foundation in Barbados, which aims to connect CSOs with volunteers drawn from the corporate sector to enhance institutional capacity, legitimacy and accountability (ASPIRE, 2023).

Capacity-building approaches have also considered building the capacity of CSOs to engage in the policy and advocacy environment. These approaches help civil society to understand how policies are formed and operationalised and how they can potentially respond to influence and shape policy, and also contribute by providing spaces and platforms through which civil society actors can engage with policymakers (e.g. Commonwealth Foundation (2019)). One example is the Caribbean Consultative Working Group (CCWG), which, supported by the Commonwealth

Foundation, aimed to enhance civil society engagement in policy development across the region through the facilitation of national policy dialogues and policy and advocacy training workshops (Byrde, 2015; 2016).²

Capacity building with CSOs will only be successful and effective if there is a willingness within state organisations to meaningfully engage with civil society, which relies upon the state being willing to (i) allow space for a critical and active civil society, and (ii) listen to and constructively engage with civil society input and concerns (European Commission, 2012). In Singapore, for example, while the provision of Speakers Corner in Hom Ling Park in 2010 was positioned as offering greater freedoms of (political) speech and assembly, and a space for critical engagement and use by civil society, the reality is markedly different, with significant limitations over its use and ongoing extensive surveillance of the space (Hammett and Jackson, 2018). While such measures are often couched in the language of ‘public order’ and ‘the national interest’, these justifications can be selectively used to close down dissent and opposition. Key dangers follow from this: that civil society is unable to effectively act as the bridge between state and citizens and promote (sustainable, national) development; and that without the opportunity for dissent or disquiet to be expressed through civil society a crucial ‘safety valve’ is removed, leading to the storing-up of tensions and disquiet, which may then cause longer-term harms.

Although there is substantial evidence of capacity building being a key part of engagement with civil society ecosystems, there is limited evidence of the effectiveness of different forms of and approaches to capacity building, with acknowledgement that evaluating the effectiveness of capacity building can be difficult due to its intangible nature, the length of time change can take, the number of interventions that are part of capacity building and the fluid nature of civil society organisations and civic space (Simister et al., 2021). The contextual nature of civil society and the wider civic landscape is crucial here, and there cannot be a capacity building ‘toolkit’ that would be effective in every context.

While there is perhaps little consensus on what effective capacity building looks like, research has detailed the potentially negative impacts of the shift towards an increasingly professionalised civil society as part of the capacity-building agenda. Concerns including the potentially exclusionary nature of capacity building, as well as its potentially depoliticising effects, are crucial to consider. There is a danger that capacity building can lead to a loss of passion within (smaller) organisations – they are at risk of becoming formalised NGOs, rather than the more grassroots or community-based organisations they initially were. With this shift comes a potential distancing from marginalised groups (Squire, 2021). A key question remains: in the context of narrowing civic space, how can capacity for ‘critical voices’ be supported?

2 For an example of capacity building in the Pacific, see PIANGO (2020).

5.3 Supporting youth organising

There is significant evidence that young people are active within civil society and civic space (Jeffrey, 2008), particularly outside the more formalised political sphere (for example, voting or engagement with political parties (Pickard, 2019)). While the political agency of youth is often celebrated, it must also be remembered that youth politics can create and reproduce exclusions and inequalities, and that there is an intersectional unevenness in the opportunities available for civic participation (Walker, 2021). Youth participation may also be governed by cultural norms and values – with, for example, Craney (2019: 138) commenting on the ‘structural minimisation of youth’ in the Pacific.

Youth movements and civic participation have a longstanding history in many SIDS, at both national and regional scale. The ‘youth bulge’ is significant for many SIDS (Lee and Craney, 2019) and youth are positioned as the future of SIDS (Commonwealth Youth Council, 2022).³ Youth empowerment is noted to be integral to the SIDS Zero Draft Outcome Document 2024. There is, then, greater acknowledgement than ever that youth participation and engagement is crucial for civil society – and there are many international and regional forums for youth engagement; the Commonwealth Youth Networks and regional youth councils are two examples. In 2013 UNESCO, UNICEF and UNFPA conducted three regional workshops with young people from SIDS to discuss the future of their islands, with young people focusing on education, health and climate change (UNESCO, 2013).

There is also a plethora of global youth civic movements aimed at supporting and mobilising youth activists, often in relation to global sustainable development goals, including Action Aid’s Global Platforms Network, Global Youth Mobilisation, and Global Citizen. Those youth activists who are able to engage with these platforms, networks and events can benefit from vital network building, skills, leadership and advocacy training, and opportunities to engage with global circulations of people and ideas (Staheli et al., 2016). However, key barriers to such opportunities persist for these forms of engagement: interviews with the organisers and attendees at a series of in-person global youth mobilisation events indicated persistent challenges with exclusionary visa regimes, financial barriers including event fees as well as travel and other costs, and distance/time barriers (particularly for those from more remote locations – including SIDS). In sum, there is increased interest in youth engagement in high-level mechanisms and fora; however, there are attendant concerns, with risks of tokenism, and inadequate resources and support (Craney, 2019; Commonwealth Youth Council, 2022).

There are also myriad youth-led organisations which operate at local, national and regional scales, led by passionate and motivated young people. Young people across SIDS are engaging in and

3 It should be noted that there is a lack of consensus on the definition of ‘youth’ – the UN, for example, adopts a chronological definition of youth as people between 15 and 24 (Charles and Jameson-Charles, 2022: 17).

attempting to transform their societies (Gilbert-Roberts, 2022; Gowreesunkar et al., 2022; Ho, 2020; Lee and Crane, 2019). Ochieng-Springer and Francis (2019) detail the ‘Life in Leggings’ movement, which was built by Caribbean youth in response to gendered violence and police neglect. This spawned the hashtag #lifeinleggings and encouraged youth across the Caribbean to share their experiences of gender-based violence. National Youth Councils have a longstanding history in many SIDS and have been seen as a way of engaging youth who are excluded from dominant political spaces (Sanatan, 2019). There is, though, concern that the engagement of youth in these spaces can act as a form of co-option by the state (Ho, 2020).

Notwithstanding the lively and varied landscape of youth involvement in civil society, it is under increasing threat in many SIDS, with the narrowing of civic spaces, outmigration and similar organisational vulnerabilities of wider civil society. The socio-economic and cultural positioning of youth in many SIDS – and concerns about education, employment and intersectional inequalities – also shape youth civic participation (Crane, 2019). While there appears to be support for youth engagement in ‘high-level’ fora, particularly at regional and international scales, there appears to be less emphasis on youth engagement in more organic and informal civic spaces within SIDS. Although opportunities to participate in high-level fora are important for enhancing youth voices and participation in development, there is also a risk that these (often relatively limited) opportunities further intersectional unevenness in youth organising. There is a danger that we see a professionalising of youth engagement, limited to ‘elite’ (and often ‘older’) voices, and restricted to fora that may be constructed to be ‘non-political’.

Consequently, there is a need to differentiate between the invited spaces constructed for youth participation and the more autonomous spaces which are predominantly constructed and governed by youth themselves. Support for youth engagement appears to have focused on increasing youth spaces and voices in high-level fora, yet less is known about how best to support youth in developing more organic civic spaces.

6 Recommendations

From the empirical evidence available, we know that there are often vibrant and passionate civil society sectors in many SIDS. In the past, some of this work has been supported by international aid architectures, and while it continues to be the case, the extent of this support is greatly diminished. Key challenges for contemporary civil society in SIDS include a changing civic landscape and alterations in the resources available. A detailed understanding of the wider civic landscape, the heterogeneities between different SIDS and the nuances and subtleties of civic space in many SIDS will be critical. Crucially, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to nurturing civil society in SIDS. Resource mobilisation for civic organising remains essential across SIDS, and appropriate financial support will continue to be paramount. Foundational to any approach that aims to nurture civil society is the need for a greater understanding of civil society and civic space in SIDS which includes the more informal and fluid forms of associational life that exist outside of the remit of formalised NGOs. Of note is the relative inattention to civil society among African, Indian Ocean and South China Seas SIDS.

There are two key considerations which underpin all these recommendations:

- the need to design interventions to support civil society with civil society actors themselves – we know that approaches to strengthen civil society ‘from the outside’ do not always acknowledge the complexities of civil society, are not always welcomed and can have (unintended) negative consequences for the sector
- the importance of learning from past experiences, including the development of mechanisms to facilitate the sharing of diverse forms of knowledge about civic organising across borders, organisational typologies and interests, alongside opportunities to consolidate such learning.

6.1 Cross-SIDS network building

CSOs in many SIDS often feel increasingly atomised and isolated. Regional civil society networks and secretariats (e.g. CPDC, PIANGO) have provided varied opportunities for learning, support, solidarity and the exchange of knowledge and skills. Scaling up these networks to operate across SIDS, recognising the unique conditions for civil society in SIDS and the benefits of ‘South-South’ engagement, will provide a support mechanism for strengthening civil society as they look to understand and address similar challenges.

There are, however, notes of caution and lessons to be learnt from past experiences of civic network building. It should be noted that a CPDC–PIANGO alliance was previously established – at the 3rd International Conference on SIDS in Samoa in 2014 (see Byrde (2014)) – but the outcomes of this relationship are not clear. Reflecting on this, and on other partnerships, may provide the starting point for thinking about a cross-SIDS network. Learning from existing networks that have successfully achieved their objectives will be critical. If the barriers detailed

above are to be overcome, it is crucial that any cross-SIDS network be designed collaboratively with civil society actors themselves. In the case study of regional movements in the Pacific, organising and aligning around a common theme or goal appears to be key to success, with practical considerations such as minimising internal competition, rotating positions of power and encouraging engagement by a range of civil society actors also important. Considering the potential (and limitations) of digital technology to facilitate such networks is crucial. The potential of the ‘technology mechanism’ through the SIDS Centre of Excellence to provide spaces and platforms for civil society solidarity, knowledge exchange and support is also important to consider.

6.2 Capacity building for ‘critical’ voices

Questions remain about spaces for more ‘critical’ or ‘progressive’ voices within SIDS environments. A capacity-building programme to support these voices is crucial for transformative change and would benefit from drawing on experiences from civil society operating in both open and narrowed civic spaces in middle – and upper-income small island states. There are two potential angles to any capacity-building approach. Firstly, taking the approach of nurturing the capacity of ‘critical’ voices themselves. This requires a programme of work that looks to understand the capacity challenges for organisations that may consider themselves ‘critical’ or ‘radical’, as any capacity-building initiative needs to be designed in a participatory and collaborative way with these civil society actors. Secondly, looking at the potential for capacity building within state institutions to engage proactively and constructively with (more progressive) civil society organisations. This could include advocating for the developmental (and other) benefits of providing an open civic space – and perhaps material resources – to support civil society: not as a service delivery partner but as a ‘development partner’, whose role is to work not simply hand-in-glove with the state but rather as a ‘critical friend’.

6.3 Youth organising

Youth engagement in civil society can be uneven, with concerns about ‘the next generation’ sometimes voiced within the sector. Working out how to support youth engagement beyond a consultative process is crucial, with emphasis constructively placed on participatory design, peer-to-peer mentoring and flexible and diverse approaches to funding (Restless Development, 2023). Programmes must therefore be youth-centred and – driven, not ‘programmes for the youth’ (Michel, 2022: 96). Consideration must also be given to the wider environment in which young people live, their concerns, and how intersectional inequalities shape the potential for civic organising. Resource constraints will need to be addressed, and the barriers around inequality of access considered.

Accordingly, recommendations focus on the development of a programme of work that supports youth in being active (activist) civic beings, rather than the mere provision of spaces in which they can be consulted. Firstly, this can focus on ‘the youth’ themselves – for example, celebrating the achievements of historical and contemporary youth civic organising, articulating the impact that youth organising can have on society, addressing the inequalities in youth civic organising, emphasising pathways through which they can engage with civic activities, working with existing youth civic organisations and thinking how they can be supported in their work. Secondly, a programme of work can consider the civic environment in which young people operate, looking at what is constraining their activities – e.g. cultural norms, lack of available spaces and material resources for organising, lack of transparency in governance processes – and advocating for a more open civic space.

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