

Local Actors' Capacity Strengthening Needs in INDONESIA



Introduction

In line with the Asia Religious and Ethnic Freedom (REF) program's learning agenda, this brief aims to provide valuable insights into the institutional and staff capacity needs, strengths, and challenges faced by local partners in the context of promoting religious and ethnic freedoms in the Asia region. This learning brief focuses on answering learning questions to enhance our understanding of the capacity building needs and strengths of local partners. By analyzing their experiences, the Asia REF team aims to identify information gaps, technical capacity needs, and the factors that hinder or facilitate effective work in promoting religious freedom. This knowledge will guide the team in developing targeted interventions and strategies to strengthen the capacity of local Asia REF partners to promote religious and ethnic freedoms in Asia.

The data was collected during the Local REF perspectives workshop with civil society representatives (CSOs), experts, and researchers who are working in the field of promoting freedom of religion in Indonesia on June 6, 2023. In total, 16 people participated in the meeting, including 7 females and 9 males. The discussion focused on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and risks (SWOT) local NGOs face in implementing internationally funded religious freedom projects, as well as their assessment of the benefits and limitations of cooperation with donor organizations.

Institutional & Staff Capacity of NGOs in Indonesia

Strengths

- CSOs are well-positioned to identify and address community problems. They often experience FORB issues directly or engage closely with communities that have first-hand experience, therefore having accurate understanding of the root problems and actors that influence religious freedom.
- Most CSOs have connections with grassroots stakeholders, which enables them to reach the most vulnerable groups. Although local stakeholders may sometimes underestimate CSOs' influence and capacity to address FORB issues, CSOs are typically able to engage key stakeholders within local communities.
- CSOs possess high levels of idealism, which can drive their work and dedication to their causes. CSOs working to advance religious freedom are human-rights focused and are sometimes at-odds with the religious harmony-based approaches used by government actors, which may compromise rights in exchange for harmony. Despite the challenges of working in this environment, they remain committed to advancing religious freedom.
- CSOs often exhibit strong teamwork, enabling them to collaborate effectively and achieve their goals. CSOs typically consist of small teams and have a flexible structure, which allows for practical communication and coordination between staff/ members when managing programs.
- CSOs can creatively modify and translate ideas to be more acceptable to the grassroots community, showcasing their flexibility and adaptability. They are able to leverage their understanding of local community values and advocate for change using an angle or approach that is in line with the community values.

Weaknesses

- CSOs may get stuck repeating the same approaches and interventions that have been found to work reliably. While this helps these organizations to achieve their objectives efficiently, it also limits creativity and innovation, leading to monotonous programming and missed opportunities to find new approaches.
- CSOs may display a high level of 'ego' within their specific sectors, which can narrow opportunities for collaboration with other organizations. This can be observed in instances where organizations opt to work independently due to a perception of possessing better capabilities, networks, and resources, resulting in missed collaborative opportunities.
- Many CSOs struggle to access funding due to a lack of information and resources. This is especially challenging for early-stage CSOs, potentially impacting their attractiveness to young people considering careers in the field.
- CSO management practices are often self-taught, lacking proper guidance or formal training. The absence of figures or mentors specialized in CSO management further compounds this issue. As a result, CSOs often struggle to comply with the extensive administrative requirements of donors even though it is vital for their accountability.

Risks

- Many CSOs heavily rely on certain influential figures to steer the direction of the organization's strategy. Furthermore, these influential figures may have good relations with donors, which provides access for the CSOs to secure program funding. If these figures are absent or no longer involved, it can significantly weaken the organization.
- Some beneficiaries may be wary of CSOs' involvement due to concerns about safety, and there is a need to build trust and ensure that CSOs approach issues in a sensitive and appropriate manner.
- CSOs might lack sensitivity and understanding of dynamics in grassroots communities and bring negative exposure to vulnerable groups. For instance, CSOs may bring education on issues that create backlash and put vulnerable groups that were initially tolerated by local communities at risk.
- The profession of working in CSOs is often not considered attractive or fulfilling basic needs, making it challenging to compete with more lucrative sectors. It is crucial to showcase the importance of CSOs and their impact, emphasizing their role as essential entities for government collaboration.
- CSOs lack adequate legal protection, and those working on FORB issues face particular risks. Law enforcement agencies may not prioritize the protection of advocacy groups, which can lead to underreporting of violations and fears of backlash from the majority.

Opportunities

- The existence of platforms for knowledge exchange between CSOs, where CSOs can benefit from the opportunity to collaborate and share ideas. Lessons learned from the practices of peers CSOs can gain fresh perspectives and areas for improvement, therefore enhancing their capacity.
- CSOs possess a wealth of social capital, which can support their field experts and provide flexibility in their work. The professional and personal relationships that CSOs build both internally between team members and externally, for instance with grassroots stakeholders, contributes to the success of the organization's programs.
- Mapping CSO works and interventions in the field can help identify gaps and opportunities for collaboration, improving overall effectiveness and impact. Collaboration between organizations is essential, as no single organization can handle all issues effectively.

NGO & Donor/INGOs Cooperation

Strengths

- Collaboration enhances the credibility of institutions, showcasing confidence in the issues they address and gaining recognition from local stakeholders. When CSO initiatives are backed by international organizations, stakeholders are often more willing to recognize the authority of CSOs and cooperate with them.
- Collaborative efforts with donors/INGOs enable CSOs to design and implement more impactful programs beyond their limited resources, reaching a larger audience and creating significant change.
- Collaboration fosters an increased perspective on intersectionality and awareness of global issues. Donors/INGOs can share international resources with local CSOs to fill information gaps in the country.
- Collaboration provides opportunities for capacity building in administration and finance, strengthening the overall management of CSOs.
- Donors often have coordination platforms for CSOs under the same program, where these organizations can learn from different practices, recognize how each organization's efforts contribute to the program goals, and potentially create collaboration between CSOs.

Weaknesses

- Limited duration of funding provided by donors for projects. CSOs often do not have the resources to continue programs in the long term and therefore cannot sustain the changes that they seek to make, even if stakeholders in the project area are eager to continue working with them.
- Fragmentation can occur within the collaboration process, as individual organizations may prioritize their own issues, hindering effective cooperation. CSOs have their own interests that they seek to advance and prefer to work alone if it means that they have to sacrifice their interests.
- Limited access to information and resources, particularly for CSOs outside Jakarta, as there is disparity in awareness of funding opportunities between well-connected organizations in the capital city and those in local areas.
- CSOs may face legal obstacles as some donors require official names and legal standing for funding support. Smaller CSOs, especially those that rely heavily on volunteers to run their programs, often do not have necessary administrative requirements such as legal registration due to lacking resources to formalize their organization.
- Limited human resources, including communication capabilities (also language barriers) and capacity to meet donor expectations, can impede collaborative efforts' effectiveness. CSO staff may not yet have the ability to follow donors' extensive requirements and therefore need further capacity building.
- Issues of fairness regarding salary disparities and support given to different organizations. CSOs typically have a much lower salary standard compared to international organizations and may provide a lower rate due to lack of awareness of market standards, which in turn affects their ability to recruit talent into the organization.

Opportunities

- Networking and consortia, including those facilitated by donors/INGOs, allow organizations to tap into existing networks formed around specific issues such as Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) and FORB. Knowledge transfer and sharing of best practices within these collaborative spaces foster growth and learning. Furthermore, donors can leverage their resources and connections to provide knowledge-sharing opportunities for local CSOs beyond national stakeholders.
- Collaborative efforts enable co-creation, where institutions can integrate strategic plans with donor objectives to create impact together. This allows donors and CSOs to identify gaps in existing programming under the donor and see how CSOs can develop initiatives that address these gaps.
- Strengthened capacity of CSO to manage project implementation and financial aspects are key to ensuring the continuity of CSOs. CSOs have a strong understanding of the local context and a strong network with grassroots stakeholders needed to effectively implement and the accountability in reporting the projects. However, they would benefit from strengthened capacity to create compelling proposals that can draw the interest of donors.

Risks

- Divergent interests and local policies may potentially impede activity implementation, leading to conflicts with government, local communities, and religious groups and potential restrictions on CSOs' operational areas.
- Persecution and lack of protection for sensitive or controversial issues pose threats. CSOs working on the promotion and protection of religious freedom are seldom protected by the law and by law enforcement. In some cases, law enforcers instead suppress individuals who report violations of religious freedom, and the government may also even see CSOs as an opponent or threat towards key issues.
- Feeling limited in addressing all donor requests, especially with geographical restrictions. Donors may be interested to work in specific areas in Indonesia where CSOs may be prohibited from working due to constraints from the government.
- Skepticism or questioning of international involvement can create tensions and impact the perception of local organizations. International organizations are often perceived to have hidden interests or accused of bringing "liberal" values that are incompatible with local Indonesian values.
- Varied support, expectations, and willingness to listen and adapt project designs based on challenges expressed by CSOs from different donors. Not all donors provide CSOs with the flexibility to adapt to challenges in the field. This limits CSOs' ability to change their approach in response to these challenges.

Conclusion

The SWOT exercise conducted for local organizations promoting religious freedom in Indonesia highlights several key insights.

Local CSOs have deep community roots that both allow them to have acute understanding of the situation and to effectively engage with stakeholders on the ground, making them well-positioned to address religious freedom issues in local communities. However, the ability of local organizations to reach a wider range of beneficiaries and create impact is often limited by the resources available to them. Furthermore, CSOs often have limited capacity to manage projects in a way that ensures accountability and sustainability of both the organization itself and the interventions that they carry out. Additionally, despite the sensitive nature of FORB work there is little legal protection for minority groups and for those advocating for their rights. The government often sees CSOs as opponents or threats to public interest.

Donors/ international organizations have an important role in addressing these gaps. They can provide capacity building for grant management, provide coordination and knowledge exchange platforms that allow CSOs to gain insight to different practices or innovations, and consolidate CSOs working to promote and protect religious freedom. The consolidation of CSOs that are supported by international organizations are seen as more credible in the eyes of stakeholders, including government actors, and may be leveraged for FORB advocacy.

Recommendations

Below are recommendations for donors to consider and contribute to strengthening the capacity of local NGOs and support their efforts to promote religious freedom in Asia.

Foster Collaboration and Coordination: Facilitate collaboration and coordination among CSOs to address fragmentation and emphasize opportunities for partnerships. CSOs should be encouraged to share resources, expertise, and networks to maximize their collective impact on FORB issues.

Assist with Legal Requirements: Offer assistance to nascent and smaller CSOs in meeting legal requirements for funding support. This may include providing guidance on legal registration processes, assisting in paperwork, and advocating for simplified administrative procedures with donors.

Flexible Funding Approaches: Donors should consider flexible funding approaches that support the long-term sustainability of CSO projects. This includes providing multi-year grants and allowing for adaptive programming to address evolving challenges.

Capacity Strengthening: Prioritize capacity building for CSO staff, focusing on communication capabilities, language proficiency, and the ability to meet donor expectations. Develop training programs that enhance CSOs' skills in proposal writing, project management, and reporting.

Promote Geographic Inclusivity: Donors/NGOs should aim to work with CSOs in various geographic areas, not limiting their support to specific regions. This helps address challenges related to government restrictions and expands the reach of FORB initiatives.

Transparent and Inclusive Engagement: Donors/NGOs should engage with local CSOs transparently, ensuring that expectations, support, and project designs are discussed collaboratively. Create a feedback mechanism that allows CSOs to adapt their approaches based on challenges encountered in the field.

Improve Access to Funding and Information: Provide support to early-stage CSOs in accessing information and funding by developing mechanisms for sharing donor-related information and offering capacity-building programs focused on grant proposal development, donor engagement, and financial management. Donors/INGOs can also consider creating accessible funding mechanisms tailored to the needs of young and emerging CSOs.

Legal Protection for CSOs: Advocate for improved legal protection for CSOs, particularly those working on REF issues. Engage with relevant authorities and law enforcement agencies to ensure the safety and protection of advocacy groups, reducing the risk of underreporting and backlash.