From providers to partners: a new paradigm for the role of civil society in the evaluation process

This article presents an approach adopted by the International Organization of La Francophonie (OIF), outlining its partnership with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in the promotion of the French language and Francophone cultures. It demonstrates the role of civil society and its benefit in the evaluation and definition of public policies as well as the implementation of projects. The author argues that the lack of involvement by these actors in policy evaluations is often linked to the fragility of the partnership between public authorities and CSOs. She calls for a paradigm shift that could lead to the structuring, development and influence of a neutral, independent and non-profit civil society.
Partnerships with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are one mechanism of intervention for the International Organization of La Francophonie (OIF). However, the understanding of "civil society" may have very different meanings and realities. The OIF recognizes the following entities as CSOs: non-governmental organization (NGOs), foundations, cooperatives, professional associations, social partners, and economic actors who have a limited profit goal (such as social enterprises).

As a result, the OIF has opted for a three-fold approach in its partnership with CSOs. CSOs are, first of all, beneficiaries of actions within missions of the Francophonie. This entails the promotion of the French language and Francophone cultures, support for peace and democracy, support for education, youth, citizenship and sport as well as issues relating to human, economic and sustainable development. The OIF also aims to promote the structuring, development and influence of French-speaking civil society as a whole. This mobilization is put in place through training, networking and support activities in the implementation of projects by French-speaking CSOs. Likewise, CSOs are considered, within the Francophonie, as strategic partners. The OIF has therefore set up an accreditation system for INGOs/NGOs, which are privileged partners of the organization and its member states and governments. They thus benefit from a permanent forum for dialogue with other accredited CSOs, which promotes their networking, structuring and development within the French-speaking world. Subsequently, the 127 INGOs and NGOs currently accredited to OIF are able, via the Conference of International NGOs (COING), to be involved in strategic discussions and activities, which contribute to the construction of tomorrow's Francophonie.

CSOs are increasingly seen as partners in the definition, development and implementation phases of public policies or projects. Indeed, faced with the complexity of current world challenges, states, governments and even intergovernmental organizations are calling for public policies or multi-actor projects to cover all facets of the same
issue. As part of a study carried out in 2019 aimed at measuring the overall state of Francophone civil society, the OIF highlighted that globally, within the Francophone arena, “interviewed CSOs perceive that their role is progressing in their countries. This is particularly noticeable with regard to the involvement of civil society in the definition of public policies and in the advancement of national CSO advocacy”.

None the less, although CSOs contribute to the formulation and implementation of public policies and development projects, they are still often absent during the evaluation phase. According to the Development Assistance Committee (DAC / OECD), evaluation makes it possible to “bring an systematic and objective appreciation of [public policy] or a completed or ongoing project, a program or a set of actions, design, implementation and results. It is a question of determining the relevance of the objectives and their degree of achievement, development efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability”. Operationally, the OIF sees the evaluation process as a continuous process of qualitative and quantitative assessment occurring during the different phases of the implementation of a public policy or a project.

Despite this, it is clear that CSOs remain little involved in the evaluation of results and outcomes of public policies and projects that they may have helped to develop or implement. As direct or indirect beneficiaries of all public policies and / or development projects, CSOs could be more systematically tapped into to better understand the relevance, results and outcomes of public strategies and deployed actions deployed. As representative organizations of citizens, CSOs could also be involved as stakeholders in the evaluation processes by participating, for example, in the definition of terms of reference, the conduct of an evaluation and in the preparation of final reports.

So why then are CSOs still so little integrated into these essential stages, which are paramount for the success of a public policy or project? To what extent is the absence of CSOs in these processes undermining both the credibility of the evaluation, the effectiveness of the projects carried out as well as the reality of the long-awaited civil society / donor partnership?

I. A fragile public-civil society partnership limits their contribution to the evaluation of public policies and implemented projects.

In a survey conducted by the Institut français d’opinion publique, or IFOP, from February 8 to 12, 2018, the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE) questioned the French as to their perception of civil society and its role. While civil society remains a notion that is not precisely defined for a large part of our fellow citizens, a large majority of them (86%) consider that they must be heard by public authorities and play a leading role in the democratic balance. Yet 77% consider that [civil society] is insufficiently listened to ...

This observation can be partly explained by the fact that the relationship between public authorities and CSOs has evolved in a paradoxical manner over several decades. Many CSOs came into being as a reaction to the failings and / or inadequacies of public policies with many immediately positioning themselves as opponents of the very public authorities they may need to work with. In addition, over the years, some of these entities have gradually become politicized, de facto evading the principles that govern the nature of CSOs: neutrality, independence and non-profitability. This permeability between the political and civil defense arena has reinforced the mistrust of public authorities towards civil society, leading to assimilate CSOs with political opposition.
Indeed, many public authorities have long held a reluctance to grant a role to CSOs. A study commissioned by the OIF in 2019 looking at the role of French-speaking civil society identifies three major contexts in which civil societies operate and which determine their capacities for action: “open” contexts, “semi-open”, and “closed”. In this regard, it was noted that, in the French-speaking world, there is, in a certain number of countries, a reduction in the space for civil society, which is demonstrated by a decline in dialogue between civil society and public authorities - and even a tightening of regulatory framework vis-à-vis civil society. In these contexts, we speak of an CSO counter-revolution, which first affects the most sensitive organizations (especially human rights organizations).

In this context, it would therefore seem difficult to make CSOs partners in the evaluation of public policies and projects, not only by public authorities but by technical and financial partners as well. Indeed, to allow civil society the capacity to assess the relevance of activities, it is necessary to not only benefit from mutual trust and understanding, but also from mechanisms favoring the structuring of long-term partnerships between civil society, public authorities and, technical or financial partners. This desire for partnership, which de facto excludes any tendency to engage civil society by authorities or the desire to destabilize political authorities by CSOs, is the sine qua non condition for allowing civil society to play its role of citizen watchdog: a pledge of credibility, relevance and impact of public policies and / or implemented projects.

In fact, the participation of CSOs in the evaluation process is likely to encourage a greater uptake on the part of a community as relates to public policies and projects. Although CSOs are not the only entities who can encourage an appreciation of the benefits of a project by the community as a whole, they are nevertheless rooted in these communities and can thus, legitimately, share and reflect the overall benefit, as well as results, from a public program.

CSOs are also able to identify and respond to blind spots that may appear during the evaluation process. In all evaluation processes, even the most inclusive and complete, there can be imperfections and/or oversights made to the terms of reference or expected results of a public policy or implemented project. This may not be intentional or due to a lack of consideration on a certain number of possible outcomes, but highlight how the involvement of CSOs during this phase constitute a particularly useful mechanism to ensure programs and final analysis benefit not only beneficiaries and stakeholders but also third parties that may be impacted in one way or another.

II. The participation of civil society organizations strengthens the credibility of an evaluation process.

The involvement CSOs in the evaluation of public policies and / or projects (as beneficiaries and as stakeholders) considerably increases the quality and relevance of the evaluation process. This participation promotes the integration of a fully transversal vision throughout a policy or process. While international cooperation projects become more and more sophisticated and embrace increasingly complex and complementary dimensions of the same issue, an evaluation carried out by solely external consultants in conjunction with public authorities / technical partners is not more sufficient.

III. Involving civil society organizations in evaluation: putting in place a guarantee for the quality of public policies and development projects.

The involvement and engagement of CSOs in evaluation processes can bring many advantages, in terms of the projects themselves as well as lending to the credibility of the process itself.
First of all, a coordinated approach can enrich the quality of public policies and/or development projects. While the expected results of a development action should be defined in its formative phase, the involvement of CSOs in the evaluation process must also be considered further upstream in the project. It therefore becomes essential to anticipate the role and missions of CSOs in developing public policy or projects. By involving CSOs in the evaluation process from the project design phase onwards, these entities are no longer de facto operators and/or implementation providers but real partners throughout the implementation process. Such a partnership is likely to increase the quality, relevance and impacts of a public policy or project as the CSOs can contribute voluntarily to reflections and can share their experiences and expertise in the field in addition to being able to identify possible risks. They then can share tools and practices that will produce the best results. Making civil society an actor in the evaluation process helps to broaden the prism of reflection around an envisaged approach and thus increase its relevance, impact and influence in the field.

In addition to enriching a project or public policy, the involvement of CSOs in the evaluation process also allows the initiator to obtain a more complete and transversal view of the relevance of the project as it is carried, it also can contribute to its sustainability. The result is, in fact, a greater adequacy in actions with needs expressed in the field as well as a greater consideration of the expectations expressed by citizens. In such a context, the public policy or project is more likely to be updated, reinforced and used again in new implementation phases.

Involving CSOs in the definition, implementation and evaluation of a public policy or project also presents opportunities at the partnership level. Although most often associated with the implementation of projects as providers/operators than as real partners, engaging civil society actors early will develop a feeling of greater belonging to public policies or projects. It can also ensure a more trusting relationship with public authorities or technical and financial partners. In this way, CSOs not only become allies of implemented projects but also reliable partners in the feedback of data, the identification of obstacles and the promotion of actors behind the projects.

### IV. An involvement that contributes to the structuring, development and influence of a neutral and independent civil society.

The development, organization and influence of an independent, neutral and non-profit civil society is a marker of healthy development as it takes into consideration the general interest and needs within a society. Involving CSOs in the evaluation of public policies and development projects naturally leads to integrating, on a more regular basis, the needs expressed by these entities and to making them beneficiaries of the actions. As a result, such an approach contributes both to the constriction and development of these entities not just for the purpose of development but also in meeting the needs of the general public.

The involvement of CSOs in the evaluation process is also a venue for networking organizations amongst themselves. This can not only create additional impact and beneficial synergies in the implementation of public policies or actions but can also weave a solid associative fabric which can mobilize collectively. Such an approach promotes mutual knowledge and fosters further development between civil society actors, all to the benefit of the policy or project. This collective mobilization of CSOs brings another virtue: that of demonstrating to states, governments and technical or financial partners the importance of working in partnership with CSOs. It can demonstrate the
credibility and effectiveness of these structures as well as their expertise in priority areas.

In conclusion, it is unfortunate that the engagement of CSOs in the evaluation of public policies and projects is limited by the very nature of their relationship with national public authorities. Reciprocal mistrust drastically limits the potential of a partnership relationship with civil society, who can and should be a stakeholder in public policies and projects - whether during their development, implementation or even in evaluation. For several years now, an increasingly prominent trend has emerged encouraging the engagement of CSOs in the preparatory steps and implementation of actions in the field, yet still only too rarely materializes in the full participation of these organizations. This situation is at the origin of a three negative impacts: 1. The partnership relationship between civil society and public authorities is built too slowly; 2. The evaluations carried out are not sufficiently inclusive; 3. Civil society finds it difficult to insert itself and to see its proper role recognized within societies.

However, for any nation, making civil society a partner in the development, implementation and evaluation of its public policies and projects constitutes a particularly effective avenue for development; both in increasing the quality of actions as well as strengthening the development of civil society. These combined can ensure a better match between policies or programs deployed in the field and the needs expressed by citizens.
The Conference of INGOs of La Francophonie:

At the heart of its action with civil society, the International Organisation of La Francophonie OIF relies on the Conference of INGOs of La Francophonie (COING). In 2020, 127 International Non-governmental Organizations (INGOs) and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) were accredited by the OIF. The accreditation, instituted by the Francophonie Charter, makes it possible to: 1. Increase the visibility of civil society within Francophonie authorities; 2. Build capacities of accredited INGOs / NGOs; and 3. Foster their association and involvement in actions and programs carried out in French-speaking countries.

The mandate of the COING enables it to: 1. Promote the major role of civil society within French-speaking societies; 2. Participate, via the President of the COING, in various entities such as the Commission for Cooperation and Programming, the Permanent Council of the Francophonie, and the Ministerial Conference of the Francophonie; 3. Transmit statements to the authorities of the Francophonie; and 4. Involve its members in the definition, management and evaluation of certain activities carried out by the OIF. The COING has an action plan covering its five thematic committees as well as some operational actions to be carried out over a period of two years.

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