



GUIDANCE DOCUMENT

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GUIDANCE DOCUMENT ON WWF ENGAGEMENT WITH CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

Updated¹ by the SD4C (Social Development for Conservation) Steering Group 12 November 2018

Purpose of this paper

WWF Civil society is one of three key agents for change – governments, private sector and civil society – that WWF engages with in order to bring about sustainable development, equitable governance of common public goods and respect for human rights.²

WWF has a long experience of engagement with civil society organizations (CSOs), communities, community-based organizations (CBOs), and civic institutions in a wide range of countries, contexts and forms. However, the extent to which we identify as civil society, as well as the ways in which we relate to other elements of civil society, varies greatly between offices, depending in part on their legal standing.

One building block of WWF's Truly Global agenda is strengthening each office's foundation in local society. This mandates closer interactions with other civil society actors in order to deliver better results, and in the process build our legitimacy and acceptance among civil society and expand our knowledge and understanding in critical areas beyond traditional conservation, like development and human rights.

While WWF recognises and encourages cooperation and collaboration with like-minded organizations³, the network has never formulated a shared strategy or articulated recommended approaches to our relationships and partnerships with other civil society actors.

¹ The original version of the document was endorsed by the SD4C Steering Group on 10 November 2015.

² http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/how_we_work/people_and_conservation/our_work/civil_society/

³ WWF Code of Ethics. <http://wwf.panda.org/organization/ethics/>

Building on the diverse experiences from our global network – as well as from the broader CSO community – this paper aims to describe WWF's engagement with civil society, and to suggest key approaches and principles to guide how various offices in the network can work with civil society more strategically and effectively.

What is civil society?

The concept of "civil society" and civil society organizations is understood, defined and described in many different ways. The Open Forum on CSO Development Effectiveness (now the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness, CPDE), an inclusive multi-stakeholder process that engaged thousands of CSOs (including WWF) from all continents and sectors, proposed the following description of the concept:

"CSOs can be defined to include *all non-market and non-state organizations outside of the family in which people organize themselves to pursue shared interests in the public domain.* (...) CSOs often operate on the basis of shared values, beliefs, and objectives with the people they serve or represent." ⁴

This definition covers a wider range of organizations that include membership-based CSOs, cause-based CSOs, and service-oriented CSOs. Examples include Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations, environmental groups, women's rights groups, farmers' associations, faith-based organizations, labour unions, indigenous peoples' organizations, international NGOs (INGOs), etc.

WWF's own understanding of CSOs also includes various membership/community-based cooperatives in which individual producers come together to promote their common interests on the market, as well as some non-profit enterprises that provide services to disadvantaged groups.

The multitude of definitions is, in part, a reflection of the diversity and complexity that characterises civil society. The forms, structures, constituencies, objectives, mandates, roles and strategies of CSOs are also influenced by, and adapted to, the different social, cultural and legal contexts in which they operate. A local community-based organization (CBO) may be quite informal, with the very minimum of structures that are needed in order to fulfil a very specific objective. CSOs that operate in repressive political environments may "take cover" within some government-approved structure, or organize themselves as a private sector entity. Organizations with a mandate to represent the interests of specific groups (labourers, farmers, artisanal fishers) will need clearly defined structures for representation and accountability towards their constituencies. And an NGO that is mainly engaged in raising funds for projects in other countries can be organized as a foundation. Other important parts of civil society, such as social movements and traditional community institutions, do not even take the form of organizations.

What is a CSO?

The WWF Compact states that WWF is "*an independent civil society organization, organized in a global network*".⁵ However, there are important differences in terms of the legal status of offices in the countries where they are based. The extent of WWF offices' foundation in local society also varies, as does the degree to which they themselves identify as – or are perceived by others to be – part of the local CSO community. WWF national offices, as well as many country offices, may be viewed as an NGO or INGO acting as part of national civil society and the global CSO community. Some country offices are involved in policy advocacy and acting as watchdogs in relation to governments and institutions, while others have mainly played the roles of technical advisors and programme managers/project implementers.

Our Truly Global agenda acknowledges these differences, but foresees "*a future in which many more offices become strong and independent ... with deep roots in civil society*".⁶ "Foundation in local society" is identified as

⁴ Taken from the web site of the Open Forum on CSO Development Effectiveness in 2015. The Open Forum web site has now been replaced by that of the CPDE: <http://www.csopartnership.org/>

⁵ *One WWF: A Compact for Our Network*, adopted at the 2012 Annual Conference.

⁶ *Truly Global Agenda*, adopted at the 2013 Annual Conference.

one of six building blocks for influential and credible WWF offices, for which acceptance among civil society, local legitimacy and legal recognition as an NGO are seen as the key parameters.⁷ The ambition to grow deeper roots is also reflected at a regional level, such as in WWF Africa's Vision 2020 which aims for the offices on the continent to be "a vibrant part of civil society and able to mobilize relevant constituencies".⁸

Why we engage

The WWF Code of Ethics states:

"As a global, multi-cultural organization, WWF embraces the concept of 'better together'; we recognize and encourage cooperation and collaboration with like-minded organizations".⁹

WWF views civil society as a key actor in bringing about change in society and in promoting democratic, transparent and accountable environmental governance systems and practices that are essential to achieving conservation and sustainable development goals. To enable such a change, WWF engages with other elements of civil society with the following aims:

- **To promote rights to resources:** Engaging with local civil society, in recognition of their rights, to support and promote collective actions with respect to their sustainable access, use and management of natural resources.
- **To promote rights to participation and representation:** Citizens have the right to engage and influence, individually or collectively through the organizations of their own choice, on decisions that affect them and have equitable access to effective remedies. Working with governments, donors and institutions, WWF and other CSOs can play an important role in enabling citizen participation or representation of diverse perspectives – including those of marginalized and vulnerable groups, and environmental and human rights defenders, whose voices are all too often not heard or silenced – in decision-making processes. We may also engage with other CSOs to defend and expand the space for civil society in contexts where this is restricted or challenged.
- **To deliver on the implementation of WWF's social policies:** Active engagement with other parts of civil society is of particular importance in our work to protect and promote human rights, gender equality and the rights of indigenous peoples, and to help alleviate poverty.
- **To hold governments and the private sector accountable:** Civil society has an important role to play in acting as a watchdog towards governments and private sector to increase their accountability.
- **To ensure effectiveness, scale and sustainability:** WWF cannot achieve our aspired conservation and sustainable development impacts without partnering with other CSOs and supporting them as drivers of change at all levels of influence. We do this both for reasons of strength in numbers/critical mass, as well as to benefit from other CSOs' strengths (technical capacities, constituencies, networks/access and reach) that are complementary to those of WWF. Active engagement and participation of organizations, communities and citizens will also help protect and sustain successful conservation outcomes, and makes it possible for WWF to disengage when other civil society actors can carry the torch.
- **To enhance mutual learning:** To an increasing extent, WWF is engaging and working in areas beyond the field of traditional conservation. CSOs whose main work is in other areas possess lots of knowledge, experiences and skills that WWF needs to learn from and incorporate in our work. In return, we can contribute to a better understanding among more development-oriented CSOs of the environmental dimensions of the sustainable development agenda, and the importance of functioning ecosystems and ecosystem services for poor and marginalised people, in particular. This may, in turn, influence them to include more of our perspectives in their projects, policies and messaging.

⁷ WWF's journey to become "Truly Global", 7 March 2014

⁸ WWF Africa Leaders Declaration, 2012.

⁹ http://d2ouvy59p0dg6k.cloudfront.net/downloads/wwf_code_of_ethics.pdf

It is, however, essential to recognise that civil society is characterised by a great diversity. It also includes CSOs that actively work against the goals that we aim for, as well as other organizations that we may not want to be associated with because of issues such as legitimacy, accountability or strategic orientation.

How we engage with civil society a global, national and local levels

WWF works together with other parts of civil society on issues of common interest and with the aim to advance common goals. These engagements come in a number of different forms, mainly as:

- Ad hoc and short-term collaborations with CSOs and communities;
- Members or participants in civil society coalitions, networks, alliances, platforms and campaigns related to specific issues or sectors; and
- Long-term and mutually agreed partnerships with other CSOs/CBOs based on clearly defined commitments, roles and mechanisms for mutual accountability.

In addition to such engagements with civil society as “peers” and for common causes, WWF sometimes also interacts with civil society for reasons that are more directly related to programmes that WWF manages, such as by:

- Commissioning CSOs to implement parts of WWF programmes/projects; and
- Engaging with CSOs/CBOs as one channel for facilitating consultation with and proper representation of communities or other stakeholders in the programmes.

The objectives and substance of such collaborations may include mutual sharing and pooling of information, experiences, skills and resources; developing and communicating joint positions and strategies; engaging in policy dialogue with decision-makers; and acting as watchdogs to make governments and private sector more accountable for their actions.

Our contributions may include support for developing platforms and coalitions for environmental governance and monitoring; leading innovative projects to enhance the active participation of civil society in support of sustainable development or biodiversity conservation; empowering women and promoting youth leadership in environment and development to secure the rights of future generations.

WWF may also provide direct support, through funding or other means, for strengthening the capacity and sustainability of CSOs that represent constituencies with an important role to play in sustainable natural resource management, and/or are well positioned to exert influence in decision-making or behavioural change within a sector or a region. In settings where no such CSO exists, WWF offices have actively initiated or otherwise supported the creation of new organizations.

Every form of collaboration with and support to other CSOs is associated with its own challenges, costs and even risks, which need to be identified and weighed. There is also a need for being strategic in assessing which collaborations are most relevant and expected to bring the highest impact in the long run. Our offices around the world have different experiences of this, and sometimes also come to different conclusions. While the diversity of contexts and objectives of our engagements makes it difficult to extract any clear-cut or one-size-fits-all recommendations, some common experiences and issues are found, and common principles emerge, that can provide useful guidance for WWF’s engagement with CSOs across the network:

- Collaboration, and formal partnerships in particular, come with reputational risks to WWF. Issues to consider before engaging in direct collaboration include legitimacy, accountability and strategic orientation of other CSOs.
- Partnership requires significant time to build trust and relationships. In order to justify this time, both partners should be sure that there is value addition to justify and motivate the transaction costs of relationship building and management. This often comes in the form of complementary rather than competing skills and expertise.

- Being a large, well-resourced international network with close relationships with governments, institutions and private sector actors, WWF is the stronger party in many collaborations with CSOs. As such, the responsibility to foster equitable terms of collaboration and partnerships (see key principles below) largely falls on us.
- Commissioning other CSOs to implement parts of WWF programmes/projects may limit or colour the perception of WWF as a member of the CSO community. For this reason, the practice has been abandoned by some WWF offices. Offices that work in this way should be aware of the implications and may want to explore other options.
- WWF sometimes promotes the formation of new organizations according to its own needs, and in its image. Such initiatives must entail strong participatory processes and local ownership to ensure the organizations reflect the needs and aspirations of their respective constituencies.
- Even when CSOs and CBOs have roots in or access to communities that we need to work with, they do not always represent all members of those communities. In addition to engaging with CSOs, WWF should also engage in discussions, and sometimes joint activities, directly with the communities, CBOs, and marginalized or sub-groups to enhance representation of and accountability to diverse stakeholders.

Creating an enabling environment

Recognising the essential role of civil society as partners for change, WWF welcomes and supports the development of strong, independent, vibrant and diverse national and local communities of civil society organizations in their own right. In political contexts where the space for civil society to operate is very restricted or shrinking¹⁰, we work together with other CSOs and movements to promote a more enabling environment for effective civic engagement, social inclusion and open dialogue. In this spirit, we will:

- Actively engage in and contribute to the work of relevant CSO platforms, networks and movements
- Promote the inclusion and meaningful participation – from the local to the international level – of relevant national and local CSOs in dialogues, consultations and negotiations with policy makers, public agencies and private sector entities
- Be aware of, and minimise, the risk of WWF and other international NGOs crowding out national and local organizations from opportunities for dialogues with and influence on decision-makers, or from accessing funds that target domestic CSO communities; and
- To the extent possible, without endangering our staff or partners, take advantage of opportunities to use our status and influence to protect other CSOs that face risks of having their operations curtailed.

Equitable CSO partnerships

The International Framework and Istanbul Principles for CSO Development Effectiveness (see annex),¹¹ which have been developed and endorsed by the global community of CSOs, provide guidance on applying rights-based approaches and forming equitable partnerships between civil society actors. Partnerships that comply with the Istanbul Principles:

- Are equitable, reciprocal, respectful, and based on mutually-agreed goals and shared values

¹⁰ CIVICUS Monitor: Tracking civic space. <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/what-we-do/innovate/civicus-monitor>

¹¹ Both documents, with toolkits and guides, are available via <http://www.csopartnership.org/single-post/2018/02/15/Istanbul-Principles-for-CSO-Development-Effectiveness>

- Enhance mutual ownership and empowerment, including by identifying and openly addressing issues of power imbalances in partnerships and collaborations with CSOs
- Clearly define the roles, expectations, responsibilities and rights of all partners
- Establish mutually agreed conditions and mechanisms for risk management, monitoring, evaluation and information sharing
- Consider needs and opportunities for capacity development
- Foster opportunities and a conducive environment for systematic mutual learning and exchange based on participation, openness and trust, and encourage collaboration for knowledge-sharing with other CSOs through networks, coalitions and dialogues
- Build on mutual transparency and accountability (including towards the constituencies of each of the partners, and communities that they work with).

WWF is committed to adhering to – and facilitating the application of – these standards in all our partnerships with CSOs, and to recognise the contributions of partner CSOs and communities in our reporting and communication of results and achievements. We need to ensure that the Istanbul principles are disseminated, understood and embedded in our work to improve our effectiveness.

When we provide financial resources (from our own budgets, or with funding that we receive from other donors) in support of the work of other CSOs, we will:

- Align our support with the respective CSOs' programmatic goals, strategies and administrative systems, including, wherever possible, harmonizing requirements with other donors based on the partners' systems (we expect donors to apply the same principles of alignment when they provide funds to WWF); and
- Strive towards the provision of core/budget/programme funding for CSOs, rather than funding for separate projects.

As a learning organization, WWF is committed to also build on experiences from the partnerships that we are involved in – with fellow CSOs as well as other partners – and integrate or revise principles and approaches accordingly. Lessons that have been accumulated include the importance of:

- assigning sufficient resources and building solid structures for the proper management of partnerships;
- acquiring in-depth knowledge of your partner—their skills, values and jargon;
- acknowledging and addressing the need to make trade-offs; and
- jointly evaluating the partnership at regular intervals to distil, integrate and communicate lessons for improved impact at scale.

Deepening the engagement

Experiences from within our network, as well as from the broader CSO community, underpin the principles, approaches and commitments that have been outlined above. They now need to be applied (with due consideration for differing contexts) more broadly, consistently and systematically. Our joint objectives and methods for civil society partnerships need to be articulated and incorporated in relevant WWF strategies and programmes – a process that is already under way in some regions. We also need to continuously adopt, adapt or develop new tools and approaches for planning and implementation in key areas.

By continuing and deepening our engagement with civil society as a key driver for change, WWF will be more effective in promoting the democratic, transparent, accountable and environmental governance systems and practices that are essential to achieve conservation and sustainable development goals.

Annex 1:

The Istanbul Principles for CSO Development Effectiveness

1. Respect and promote human rights and social justice
2. Embody gender equality and equity while promoting women and girl's rights
3. Focus on people's empowerment, democratic ownership and participation
4. Promote environmental sustainability
5. Practice transparency and accountability
6. Pursue equitable partnerships and solidarity
7. Create and share knowledge and commit to learning
8. Commit to realizing positive sustainable

For more information

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