No Civil Action without Support: Principles for Practice

The Civil Society Organisation Support Initiative

Acknowledgements

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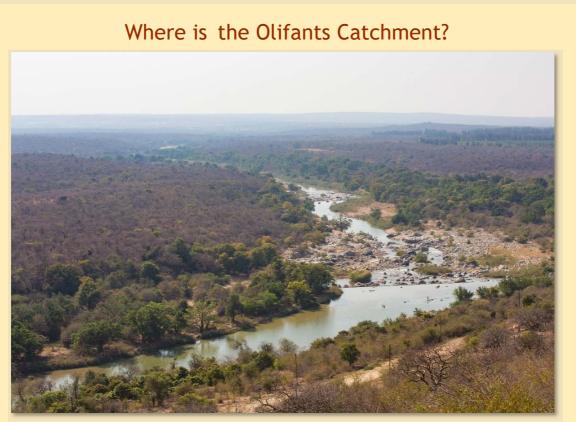2020

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Where is the Olifants Catchment?

It's not a province – it's the home of a river. The Olifants River is also known as the Lepelle River by local people – in Mozambique it's the Rio dos Elephants. We are guests in its home. The river lives there and we share the place with the river. All the land around the river makes up the catchment. The river flows from Delmas to Middelburg, Steelpoort, Phalaborwa, Mozambique, Xai Xai and into the sea. Its part of a bigger system – the Limpopo Basin – a river that is shared between Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa and Mozambique. If you want to do anything from an environmental point of view, the catchment is an important place to start. **We all live in a catchment.**

(Group work: Middle Olifants CSO Indaba, 2017)

Background

This document is a set of guidelines for those interested in supporting civil society organisations (CSOs) to develop action competence and be able to take bold steps to address the problems we face in our communities. The principles reflected here are gathered from three years of work with CSOs in the Olifants catchment, South Africa.

The Civil Society Organisation Support Initiative (CSO-SI) was one of a number of Resilience Support Initiatives under the USAID: RESILIM-O program implemented by the Association for Water and Rural Development (AWARD) between 2014 and 2017. The CSO-SI aimed to strengthen and mobilise civil society in the Olifants Catchment by building resilience through training, communications and supportive, enabling networks.

Civil society organisations are important stakeholders in ensuring that public policies are implemented reasonably and effectively in a democracy. Their roles include participating in and monitoring implementation of regional and local policies. CSOs also play a key role in strategic planning and holding public structures to account. This means they play an important 'watchdog' role in making sure that environmental challenges and issues are addressed and that people are able to insist on their rights. In a communication entitled "The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe's engagement with civil society in external relations" (2012), the European Commission referred to CSOs as independent development actors in their own right, whose efforts complement those of public authorities.

Since many of the effects of climate change and resource depletion are experienced directly by civil society, AWARD identified the need for ongoing support to CSOs within the Olifants catchment. RESILIM-O Phase 1 research indicated that a large portion of the CSO sector in the catchment was primarily reactive to events in their context. Through the CSO-SI, we aimed to transform a core group of CSOs to be more proactive and resilient in the face of climate change, resource degradation and growing livelihood insecurity.

In this document we share what we mean by civil society organisation support as applied in the CSO Support Initiative, and the principles on which our practice was based.

Learn more about the CSO Support Initiative at www.award.org.za & www.emg.org.za

CSOs from the upper portion of the Olifants catchment

1 What do we mean by CSO support?

In summary, the CSO-SI aimed to **build resilience** through facilitating communication, networking and collective action.

- Support required by CSOs was **defined by the participants** themselves and their **situatedness and functioning** within a particular context.

- Support refers to a **process of supporting** that takes time and is negotiated as change occurs along the way. It is not predetermined and allows for change and adjustment as learning occurs.

- The nature of the support was determined by the **availability of resources** within the collective and what the supporting partner (AWARD) could bring to the process.

- The nature of the support evolved over time. The initial phases involved more intensive inputs from AWARD. These were reduced as more capability developed and more responsibilities and functions were taken on by others within the collective. Support was increasingly replaced by **agency and action competence**, as the role and identity of the supporting partner evolved into one of mutual implementer and new partners entered the process as required. In this way the outcome of the support process was a **community of practice**.

2 What did the CSO-SI support?

We maintain that support for processes is more important than support for entities. All activities were designed as part of an **expansive learning process** aimed at supporting **collective action** and **transformation** processes amongst CSOs. Here is what we supported.

- Skills development. Skills are fundamental to action. The CSO participants reported that they lacked confidence partly because of a lack of relevant skills. These skills included generic skills (public speaking, presenting arguments, reporting and organisational management) and specific technical and strategic skills (collecting evidence, managing cases, accessing and interpreting legislation, water quality testing, reading graphs, writing formal legal letters etc). Skills development was supported through a series of clinics:

  - **Water Clinics:** water related legislation and practices
  - **Climate Change Clinics:** climate change concepts and adaptation techniques and practices in context
  - **Law Clinics:** environmental legislation, legal procedures, collecting and managing portfolios of evidence.

A member of the organisation CULISA explains a Change Project to other CSO members. These projects were published as case study booklets by course participants, to help them take their cases forward (available at www.emg.org.za). Issues ranged from pollution of water sources to corporate compliance with environmental legislation, to empowering communities through food gardens. The projects all led to better relationships with communities and other stakeholders, and one catalysed a growing women's movement in the middle catchment.

- The SAQA accredited Changing Practice course was made available to 17 participants from seven CSOs. This year-long programme, facilitated by EMG and Rhodes University, included in-depth transformative learning and exploration of an environmental issue relevant to their work and local context (a "change project"). Participants developed their skills of inquiry, research, analysis, communication and critical reflection, as well as emotional skills such as confidence, discernment, compassion, empathy and solidarity.

- A series of CSO "Indabas" was held in the upper, middle and lower parts of the catchment, attended by around 45 CSOs. These events provided opportunities for networking and developing a common vision as well as skills and capacity development.

- We further supported communication, solidarity and collaboration between CSOs through a Facebook page and a WhatsApp group.

An important insight from this project is that organisations providing support to CSOs need to work with them in solidarity and collaboration rather than simply offering pre-made solutions or training.

3   Principles for practice

In order to track the success of a support process it is necessary to specify the intended outcomes in some detail. We share here the principles behind the six intended outcomes of the CSO Support Initiative in the hope that they will provide useful guidance to other practitioners seeking to support civil society within resilience-building endeavours.

Improved preparedness and responsivity

- Preparedness focuses on anticipation of risks that might arise out of a particular context or situation while responsivity is the ability of the group of individuals or organisations to self-organise and then function as a group to remedy a particular situation that presents a sustained risk to the collective.

- Resilience-building draws attention to the need for CSOs to be prepared for uncertainty and unexpected events. Since preparedness is supported by the ability to respond appropriately and effectively, the two are inseparable.

- Improved CSO responsivity and preparedness (functioning) can be achieved by engaging with appropriate long-term planning processes (e.g. climate change adaptation strategies, local government plans, disaster risk reduction plans or social labour plans)

- The principles of environmental protection and sustainability also guide the process of risk reduction (resilience building).

- Attention to preparedness focuses on the resilience principles of feedbacks, connectivity, systemic planning and thinking, polycentric governance, and maintaining diversity so that there is sufficient variety to respond to different situations.

"What are we coming here to get prepared for? The answer is anything and everything – it could be a mine opening up or water pollution. When you work in NGO sector you need to be prepared for anything – food, health, etc. All challenges we are facing in our community. We need to challenge problems in a more informed manner."

Upper Olifants CSO member

The CSO-SI participants during their Changing Practice course go on a "Toxic Tour" of the upper catchment to explore contextual challenges for which they need to prepare. Affected communities need to face health hazards, water quality and air pollution issues. Ultimately they need to decide on a course of action to change the situation.

Improved ability to understand the importance of working at the systemic level

- CSOs frequently function at the community level, but need to understand the broader context within which environmental and social crises arise. This is fundamental to their being able to design appropriate responses to problems which arise outside of the local community, such as water quality degradation or climate change.

- Shifting the spatial and institutional boundaries away from the community/village to include district and then catchment is also foundational to understanding the institutional landscape. This is especially important if knowledge of provincial and local government structures is required for collective action. Understanding interconnectedness and relationships within a catchment is essential for understanding how roles and functions are apportioned between the different role players.

Mmathapelo Thobejane explains her understanding of relationships and interconectedness.

Improved institutional capability (functioning)

- An organisation's ability to operationalise its vision is related to its ability to function. Understanding institutional capability requires an understanding of the organisation's identity but also how this identity gives rise to action within the broader socio-political context.

- Dysfunctional, poorly functioning and ineffectual institutions not only hamper progress and delivery but are also an obstacle to resilience building.

- CSOs frequently require support from other organisations to function effectively (e.g. legal support, and support or access to information from various government departments); thus providing networking opportunities is important for developing institutional capability.

- Networks and improved communication between actors are vital for negotiating suitable outcomes and finding potential partners.

- Transformation from a largely unsustainable system (e.g. Olifants catchment) to a more sustainable one requires CSOs to become aware of the numerous practices that underlie the problems, and then hold the competent authorities accountable in this regard.

Improved collective action

- Collective action is based on the principle that the collective is stronger and capable of achieving more than the individual organisations making up the collective. Building the ability to act collectively addresses the resilience principles of connectivity, diversity, collective learning, participation as well as polycentric governance.

Collectives of CSOs designed campaigns to profile issues of importance within their communities. Through the CSO-SI, participants wrote more than 30 letters of complaint about environmental issues, and started more than 500 conversations on climate change.

- Since resilience is not the responsibility of any one entity or institution, mechanisms are needed for organisations to **plan and act together** to address specific risks and vulnerabilities. These platforms are important in resolving conflicts and generating collaborative plans that are more powerful than individual interventions and actions.

- Panda (2007) has defined the components of successful collective action at a grassroots level as including "institutional arrangements, clear incentives (short and long term), social capital (cohesiveness and social structure of the community), property rights, leadership, assumed gender roles and responsibilities, a sense of ownership and transparent mechanisms for the sharing of benefits".

- Collective action at the catchment scale is challenging because of the size of the geographic area, the diversity of stakeholders involved and the combination of private and common property regimes.

- In the context of the CSO-SI the key challenge was establishing a collective vision at the catchment scale that could drive collective action. The process of developing a vision and common identity through a collective Position Statement is documented in the CSO-SI final project report (available at www.award.org.za).

Improved action competence

- Action competence relates to the **ability to act** in a given situation and under particular conditions. It requires much more than simply being aware of a particular issue, so awareness raising is not sufficient. Action competence requires **skills and knowledge as well as a commitment to apply them in a given context**.

- Building action competence can be an individual or collective endeavour for those sharing the same activity. It generally involves 4 steps: planning, action, reflection and re-planning.

- *(See CHAT methodology at www.award.org.za)*

Improved commitment & motivation to change

Members of the organisation Action Voices plan for community action.

- Without motivation there is little incentive to change or to build preparedness and responsivity. Motivation is usually addressed through **identity**, **recognition** and **incentivisation.** When these are in place, people are guided and motivated to act.

■ The focus of the commitment to change is not on success or the "right way" but rather on committing to a **process of change** or transformation, and then applying the process within a particular context.

Consistent participation in the CSO-SI was recognised by means of a certificate. Gold, silver and bronze certificates were awarded for levels of attendance and commitment.

■ Although the social and legal contexts have changed since democracy was introduced in southern Africa, many CSOs experience difficulty transforming themselves and their functions. Key issues hampering transformation relate to resources, skills, legal compliance and vision.

CSOs discuss ways in which they can transform their system to respond differently to climate change.

■ Transformation requires a good understanding of the system and **sustained effort over time**. Transformation is fundamental to climate change adaption, which requires people to completely rethink the way they have previously functioned within a system. This may mean developing new practices and even new language.

See www.award.org.za

for more about the CSO-SI under USAID: RESILIM –O

The socio-political landscape in which CSOs function has transformed since democracy was established. CSOs have to keep pace with these transformations with few resources. Here a CSO member introduces new legislation and its implications for communities.

AWARD is a non-profit organisation specialising in participatory, research-based project implementation. Their work addresses issues of sustainability, inequity and poverty by building natural-resource management competence and supporting sustainable livelihoods. One of their current projects, supported by USAID, focuses on the Olifants River and the way in which people living in South Africa and Mozambique depend on the Olifants and its contributing waterways. It aims to improve water security and resource management in support of the healthy ecosystems to sustain livelihoods and resilient economic development in the catchment.

About USAID: RESILIM-O

USAID: RESILIM-O focuses on the Olifants River Basin and the way in which people living in South Africa and Mozambique depend on the Olifants and its contributing waterways. It aims to improve water security and resource management in support of the healthy ecosystems that support livelihoods and resilient economic development in the catchment. The 5-year programme, involving the South African and Mozambican portions of the Olifants catchment, is being implemented by the Association for Water and Rural Development (AWARD) and is funded by USAID Southern Africa.

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