

# The Story of the Open Forum

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Summary Report

This summary report presents a brief overview of the development and achievements of the Open Forum for CSO Effectiveness. It discusses the background to the establishment of the Open Forum; the Open Forum's objectives, structure and global consultation process; the outputs of the Open Forum, and the future of the Open Forum Principles and Framework for Development Effectiveness. The report is structured around five key questions:

1. Why was the Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness set up?
2. What is the Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness?
3. How does the Open Forum work?
4. What has the Open Forum process produced?
5. What will happen to the Open Forum and the Principles of CSO Development Effectiveness?

The report draws on interviews with members of civil society who were involved in the Open Forum process, as well as a number of Open Forum documents, referenced at the end of the report, where more detailed information can be found. An Appendix of Open Forum Spotlights features some key quotations from interviewed participants about their involvement in the Open Forum, and reflections on its achievements.

## **1. Why was the Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness set up?**

For hundreds of years, citizens around the world have come together to offer support to those in need, from treating the wounded on the battle field of Solferino, organising collections for victims of the Irish famine, to ensuring food reached starving Greece during the second World War. Civil Society Organisations today are the inheritors of a rich tradition, and many now provide essential services, advocate on behalf of vulnerable groups, and protect human rights. However, despite many achievements, and the volume of money that is now provided through the international aid system, a quarter of the world's population still lives in poverty<sup>1</sup>. Necessarily, questions have been raised about the effectiveness of the current aid delivery model, both in terms of aid provided to recipient governments, but also in terms of the development work conducted directly by civil society organisations. Recognising that existing approaches are not working well, and are even sometimes producing negative results, donor governments and aid agencies began to work with each other and recipient countries to achieve a more effective international aid system, through a series of High Level Fora on Aid Effectiveness.

### **▪ The High Level Forums on Aid Effectiveness**

Since the year 2003, a series of High Level Forums on Aid Effectiveness were initiated by the OECD. In an effort to maximise the impact of development aid, representatives of donor and aid-receiving countries met to discuss why aid was not producing the desired results and how efforts to meet the targets set by the Millennium Development Goals could be improved.

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<sup>1</sup>World Bank "World Bank Updates Poverty Estimates for the Developing World"  
<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/EXTRESEARCH/0,,contentMDK:21882162~pagePK:64165401~piPK:64165026~theSitePK:469382,00.html>

The first [High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness](#) took place in Rome in the year 2003. It concluded with a commitment by donor governments to harmonize practices in view of reducing transaction costs for partner countries.

The second [High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness](#) in Paris in 2005 was marked by the agreement on the [Paris Declaration](#), which committed both donor and recipient countries to apply specific principles with focus on improving Aid Effectiveness, with target year 2010.

The signing of the [Paris Declaration](#) was widely praised for its high aspirations and was considered an important step towards the improvement of aid effectiveness. However, despite their important roles as stakeholders in international development, as aid recipients and as donors themselves, the perspective of civil society organisations was largely absent from the Paris Declaration.

The third [High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness](#) held in 2007 in Accra included civil society representatives for the first time, both as participants in the Forum itself, and being acknowledged in the outcome document as independent actors in development. Importantly, Article 20 of The [Accra Agenda for Action](#) (AAA) recognised CSOs as development actors in their own right, and committed governments and donors to providing an enabling environment for CSOs to conduct their work.

The final, fourth [High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness](#) in Busan, South Korea, 29 November-1 December 2011, represents the culmination of discussions about how aid can be more effectively implemented, and the role that donors, recipient governments, and civil society actors must all play in achieving this.

### ▪ **The birth of the Open Forum**

The Paris Declaration Principles were conceived of as applicable to donor and recipient governments, and so were not relevant to civil society organisations. There was therefore a need to create space for CSOs to engage more fully in the on-going discussions around aid effectiveness. In 2007 the [BetterAid Coordinating Group](#) (BACG) – a CSO steering group – and, with the support of some donor governments, a temporary multi-stakeholder [Advisory Group on Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness](#) (AG-CS) were formed. After having created a formal link between CSOs and the OECD, the AG-CS negotiated a common understanding and recognition of CSOs as part of the international development system; an achievement that was reflected in the inclusion of civil society issues and participation at Accra.

Moreover, the applicability of the Paris Declaration principles to CSOs was discussed by the AG-CS during their final consultation in 2008. Considering the specific roles CSOs play in the development systems, which are different from those of official development institutions, it was decided that there was a need to create an exclusive effectiveness framework for CSOs.

Consequently, over 70 CSO representatives met in 2008 in Paris for the [Exploratory Meeting on CSO Effectiveness](#) to discuss the implementation of a suitable CSO effectiveness framework. Their decision, to form an open forum, accessible to all interested CSOs, marks the birth of the Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness.

## 2. How does the Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness work?

### ▪ What is the structure of the Open Forum?

The Open Forum for Development Effectiveness is not a permanent institution, but a global process set up for and by CSOs worldwide, to create a shared framework of principles that defines effective CSO development practice, and promotes CSOs' role in the international development system. The objectives of the Open Forum can be seen as forming three key "pillars":

1. achieving a consensus on a set of **global Principles** for Development Effectiveness
2. developing **guidelines** for CSOs to implement the Principles
3. advocating to governments for a more **enabling environment** for CSOs to operate

The structure of the Open Forum reflects its international focus. The Open Forum [Global Facilitation Group](#) (GFG) consists of 29 representatives of member organisations from five continents, nominated and elected by more than 70 representatives of CSO platforms and networks from around the world. The GFG's task is to promote, monitor and evaluate the Open Forum process.

The [Open Forum Consortium](#), a group of five CSOs, is responsible for the implementation and management of the Open Forum's work plan. The Consortium is led by the European CSO platform [CONCORD](#) which also houses the Open Forum secretariat. CONCORD coordinates the fundraising and fund management and acts as the contracting organisation for the Open Forum.

The principal [funding of the Open Forum](#) is provided by a group of 8 country governments using an innovative "chapeau" funding model. Unlike the common donor-centred approach with individual reports for each donor, the Open Forum produces only one report addressing all donor-governments as a group.

Complimentary to the Open Forum process, the [BetterAid platform](#) was set up in 2007 as a parallel CSO-led process. While the Open Forum focuses on CSOs' own effectiveness as development actors, BetterAid's goal is policy-oriented: to monitor and influence the implementation of the Accra Agenda for Action from a civil society related perspective.

### ▪ Worldwide consultations

Through [national](#), [regional](#), and [thematic](#) consultations the Open Forum reached out to thousands of CSOs worldwide to achieve a consensus on what constitutes development effectiveness for civil society, both in terms of principles that guide their work, and the environment in which they can operate most effectively.

This worldwide consultation process was designed to enable the greatest possible number of CSOs to contribute, ensuring that the Open Forum process was legitimate and inclusive of civil society globally. To guide the consultations an [Outreach Toolkit](#) was developed, which provided material to be used and organisational guidelines for CSO platforms/networks facilitating the consultations.

The Open Forum [national consultations](#) involved thousands of CSOs in over 70 countries worldwide, with between 30 and 120 participants attending each consultation. The national consultations

discussed what principles guide the way CSOs work; what CSOs are doing to improve their work, and how donors and governments can improve the enabling environment for CSOs. In this way the consultations reflected the three “Pillars” of the Open Forum: the **Principles** for CSO effectiveness; **Guidelines** for implementing the Principles; and **Advocacy** for an enabling environment.

The consultations invited representatives of local, national and regional CSOs, international NGOs, governments and donors to participate. The national consultations received positive feedback on the high level of participants’ engagement, quality of discussion and opportunities for shared learning, although the low rate of donor and government participation was a disappointment for some.

A series of regional consultations took place to initiate and then consolidate the outcomes of national consultations in each global region.

As well as the national and regional consultations, **international thematic consultations** were held on seven cross-cutting issues: CSOs and Gender; CSOs and Marginalized Groups; CSOs working in Situations of Conflict; Trade Unions; International CSOs; CSOs and the Environment, and Volunteerism. The thematic consultations allowed CSOs working in these areas to highlight what they feel are important issues for achieving development effectiveness, in their specific sector.

The outcomes of the consultations were summarised in [national](#), [regional](#) and [thematic](#) synthesis reports, and were used to draft the [International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness](#) and the eight [Principles of CSO Development Effectiveness](#).

There were challenges for the Open Forum process in reaching a consensus about what the key principles of development effectiveness should be. When engaging with civil society from countries across the world who work in very different contexts, there were necessarily differences of opinion, and differences in ways of working. The two Global Assemblies in [Istanbul](#) and [Siem Reap](#) played an important role here, as they offered the opportunity for civil society actors from around the world to come together in lively discussions, and to reach agreement on the content of the Principles and Framework for Development Effectiveness.

In addition to the civil society consultations, **multi-stakeholder dialogues** were organised at regional, national and international level in order to facilitate dialogue between CSOs, donors and governments on enabling conditions for CSOs. Donor and government policies can have a considerable impact on the effectiveness of CSOs’ work in terms of: allowing the rights to free expression, peaceful assembly and access to information; CSO legislation and taxation; regulations to promote CSO accountability to their constituencies; terms and conditions of donor support. Therefore, the initiation of successful multi-stakeholder dialogues formed a crucial part of the Open Forum process.

### ▪ **Global Assemblies**

To consolidate the outcomes of the consultation process two **Open Forum Global Assemblies** were held, in [Istanbul, Turkey \(2010\)](#) and [Siem Reap, Cambodia \(2011\)](#). In Istanbul 170 delegates, representing 82 countries, endorsed **the eight Istanbul Principles**, now the official [Principles for CSO Development Effectiveness](#). Participants also discussed the draft International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness, based on the reports from the national and thematic consultations up to

August 2010. Stakeholders involved in the Open Forum process worldwide were kept informed about the proceedings at the Global Assembly through nightly [newsletters](#) and regular [social media](#) updates.

In June 2011 in Siem Reap, a final draft of the [International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness](#) was presented to over 230 delegates. The Framework had been developed following input from civil society representatives during the Istanbul Global Assembly, as well as many more national, regional and thematic consultations that happened between Istanbul and Siem Reap.

At the Global Assembly in Siem Reap, groups of participants had the opportunity to discuss the guidance notes for each of the eight Istanbul principles, and the key sections on CSO Accountability and Critical Conditions for an Enabling Environment within the proposed draft International Framework document. Drawing on the workshop feedback, the Framework was refined and endorsed by the Global Assembly participants, becoming the Siem Reap Consensus. The [Siem Reap Consensus on the International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness](#) will serve as a key input of civil society at the [Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness](#) in Busan, South Korea. More importantly, however, it will serve as a long-term and collective statement by and for civil society on their role as development actors, the principles that guide their work, and the requirements of an enabling environment from governments and donors to do their work well.

### **3. What has the Open Forum process produced?**

#### **▪ The Istanbul Principles**

[The Istanbul Principles](#) – conceived in a collective effort by thousands of CSO representatives worldwide – are now the official principles of CSO development effectiveness. The Principles state that CSOs are effective as development actors when they:

1. Respect and promote human rights and social justice
2. Embody gender equality and equity while promoting women and girls' 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 mutual learning
8. Commit to realizing positive sustainable change

#### **▪ The International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness**

At the second Open Forum Global Assembly in Siem Reap, Cambodia in June 2011 the [International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness](#) was endorsed by representatives of CSOs from all five continents. The Framework is intended as a political document, to communicate the Principles of CSO Effectiveness and the need for an enabling environment to donors, governments and civil society.

The Framework expands on the Istanbul Principles, explaining why each principle is important, and how civil society is already implementing the Principles. A **Guidance** section lists key ways in which CSOs can achieve each Principle. The Framework includes a separate section on **Strengthening CSO Accountability Mechanisms**, which discusses how civil society can practically work with the Istanbul Principles. A further section, **on Critical Conditions for Enabling CSO Development Effectiveness**, details the elements of an enabling environment which donor and recipient governments must ensure, in order for civil society to be able to achieve the Istanbul Principles.

The Framework will form a key part of the CSO strategy at the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan: encapsulating what civil society believes is necessary to achieve Development Effectiveness, both for governments and donors, and CSOs themselves.

However the Framework has goals that stretch far beyond Busan: it constitutes a long-term vision for Civil Society, a planning and advocacy tool for CSOs to drive forward their own process of development effectiveness, and a clearly defined statement to governments and donors on the necessary conditions for an enabling environment.

### ▪ **Toolkits**

When implementing the Istanbul Principles, different cultural, political, organisational or geographical backgrounds of CSOs all over the world must be taken into account: in short, it is for CSOs themselves to determine how best to implement the Principles of Development Effectiveness. In order to support CSOs find the best way of implementing the Principles, the Open Forum has developed two [Toolkits](#) - one for Implementation and one for Advocacy. The Toolkits do not aim to duplicate existing reporting mechanisms or create a new, burdensome tool. Instead, the diverse knowledge of CSOs worldwide is being consolidated and utilised by incorporating existing mechanisms and tools encountered and collected within the Open Forum process.

The [Implementation Toolkit](#) has been developed in order to support the practical achievement of the Principles. The Implementation Toolkit helps CSOs to design their own plan to successfully implement the Istanbul Principles, through a series of questions about the socio-political context in which the CSO is working, the organisational experiences and commitments, and the personal beliefs and interests of their staff. An Inventory of Resources provides for each Principle a catalogue of activities, guides, tools and initiatives that CSOs around the world have used to take forward development effectiveness.

An [Advocacy Toolkit](#) helps CSOs to advocate towards their governments and relevant donors for a more enabling environment, in which CSOs can achieve greater development effectiveness. The toolkit provides essential information about what constitutes an enabling environment (based on the conditions laid out in the International Framework), guidance for CSOs on analysing barriers to an enabling environment in their particular context, and support in how to develop an advocacy strategy. An annex provides case studies, templates, and tools to achieve a successful advocacy strategy.

### ▪ **The Consultation Reports**

All over the world countless CSO representatives, involved in the Open Forum process, have voiced their opinion on CSO development effectiveness. [National](#), [regional](#) and [thematic](#) consultation reports from Africa, Asia, South- and North-America and Europe reflect on this enormous

communication process, informed by the multitude of roles that CSOs from different countries assume as part of the international development system. The findings from the consultation reports were incorporated into the International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness; however, they also have a wider importance. Indeed, the reports provide a valuable record of what development effectiveness means to CSOs worldwide. They have also launched many national- and regional- led initiatives, as civil society organisations have sought to respond to the conclusions reached through the consultation process about their needs, and the ways they work.

#### **4. What will happen to the Open Forum and the Principles of CSO Development Effectiveness?**

The final version of the [International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness](#) will be used as a key input by civil society at the [Busan High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness](#) in November-December 2011. At Busan, civil society organisations will be asking their development partners to:

- Fully evaluate and deepen the Paris and Accra commitments
- Strengthen development effectiveness through practices based on human rights standards
- Support CSOs as independent development actors in their own right, and commit to an enabling environment for their work in all countries
- Promote equitable and just development cooperation architecture.

Following the work to advocate for the endorsement of the Framework at Busan, the mandate of the Open Forum process comes to an end. It will be up to civil society to guide how the Principles and the Framework will be used, and organizations in each country are encouraged to adapt the Principles, and their implementation, to suit their particular context. Some civil society groups are already implementing the Principles and Framework according to their needs, and many are using the messages in the Framework to advocate for a more enabling environment in their countries.

The Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness has been a unique process, from its grassroots participatory approach, to the truly global extent of its consultations involving thousands of civil society representatives, to the achievement of the internationally endorsed Principles and Framework for Development Effectiveness. The achievements of the Open Forum will continue to have a lasting impact long after the process has come to an end, by advocating for a more enabling environment for civil society, and by inspiring and guiding CSOs to achieve more effective development work. The Open Forum process has, at every step, succeeded because of the dedication of civil society actors around the world. In the years to come, CSOs will continue to benefit from, and build upon their achievements, finding new, innovative ways to ensure the effectiveness of development work.



## **Appendix 1: Open Forum Spotlight on...**

### **Achieving a Global Consensus: the International Framework**

One of the key goals of the Open Forum process was to achieve an international consensus on what Development Effectiveness meant for CSOs around the world. To this end, an extensive national, regional and thematic consultation process was conducted with civil society organisations in over 70 countries across the world in two years. In each consultation, representatives of civil society were asked what principles guide the way CSOs work; what CSOs are doing to improve their work, and how donors and governments can improve the enabling environment for CSOs. The findings of the consultations fed directly into the development of the International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness.

Representatives of civil society said this about the Open Forum, and the global consultation process:

“In 2008 everything was so abstract, everything was so tentative... but somehow, along the way, things picked up and you see all these consultations happening in many different countries, its coming alive, things are falling into place. So you have a sense of pride... that’s my baby!”

**Tetet Lauron, Programmes Manager, Asia Pacific Research Network, Phillipines**

“In designing the regional consultation processes it was very important to stay true to the notion that it is an Open Forum. Therefore inclusiveness was a key criteria for having consultations at the country and regional level”

**Brian Tomlinson, Executive Director, Aidwatch, Canada**

“Its been an interesting challenge to bring together the different groups and the different regions to make sure that we have a common purpose. And what’s happened over the years is that that has worked very well”

**Jake Bharier, Chair, Open Forum Consortium**

### **The Istanbul Principles**

The Istanbul Principles of Development Effectiveness were developed as a result of consultation with CSOs around the world, from diverse countries, organisations, sectors and motivations. As such, they represent a global consensus on the principles that guide the work of civil society in development, and outline the ways in which CSOs are effective as development actors.

Representatives of civil society said this about the development and promotion of the Istanbul Principles:

“What makes the Principles different, coming from the Open Forum, is just how inclusive they are. How it has come from a process of Civil society engagement around the world... Many of the previous discussions on standards have often been top down, and have tended to come from the North”

**Jake Bharier, Chair, Open Forum Consortium**

“The Principle of ownership of programmes and projects, and participation of communities who are in the project area... Looking at the consultations that must have been influenced by the Africa content”

**Solomon Gichira, Outreach Officer, All Africa Conference of Churches, Kenya**

“I am very proud.. to be able to see now that the fifth principle, civil society organisations being accountable, is really in the core of the discussions. This is a very difficult issue. Its not as simple as everyone thinks it is, and I am very proud to that that with our input, the issue is in the agenda”

**Rosa Ospina Robledo, Co-Director, Inicitativa Regional Rendir Cuentas, Argentina**

## **Implementation of the Principles**

The Istanbul Principles represent a consensus amongst civil society about how they can achieve development effectiveness. However, it is important that CSOs find the most appropriate way of adapting and implementing the Principles for themselves, relevant to their particular context or sector. CSOs may experience challenges with implementing specific principles due to their cultural norms, their political environment, or their organisational capacity. Some CSOs and CSO umbrella groups have already begun to integrate the Istanbul Principles into their work, and to consider how the Principles can best support their own effectiveness.

The [Implementation Toolkit](#) developed by the Open Forum will provide guidance and concrete examples on the guidelines, mechanisms and indicators CSOs might use to put the Istanbul Principles into practice.

Representatives of civil society said this about the implementation of development effectiveness principles:

“Since the adoption of the Principles in 2010, there has been work already on how those Principles can change or evolve the way we work”

**Carolyn Long, Director of Global Partnerships, InterAction, U.S.A.**

“The Istanbul Principles came from the experience (of CSOs) so its been there all along... its something they’ve been living by since their founding”

**Lyn Pano, General Secretary, Asia Pacific Research Network, Phillipines**

“We are ... working very intensively (towards) the promotion of human rights, the promotion of gender balance and the promotion of sustainable environment protection”

**Borithy Lun, Executive Director, Cooperation Committee for Cambodia**

## **The Enabling Environment for CSOs**

Around the world CSOs are facing challenges to their operating environment through financial, political or legal constraints. These challenges have a fundamental impact on CSOs' ability to achieve Development Effectiveness in serving their constituencies. A key part of the Open Forum process has involved promoting multi stake-holder dialogue between CSOs, donors and governments and advocating for a more enabling environment, particularly at the High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan.

The [Advocacy Toolkit](#) developed by the Open Forum will complement the recommendations on minimum standards for an enabling environment for CSOs by providing ideas and examples of advocacy strategies that CSOs can adapt to their respective contexts.

Representatives of civil society said this about the Enabling Environment for CSOs:

“Enabling Environment is key to the journey that we have marched so far. And believe it or not, the enabling environment is not conducive in Cambodia right now, with the threat of ... legislation that may restrict our work, our ability to perform independently and serve the people of Cambodia”

**Borithy Lun, Executive Director, Cooperation Committee for Cambodia**

“Government went behind our back, and came up with a law that is not very conducive to our existence in Zambia, especially NGOs that are involved in advocacy work... In Zambia we are not alone in this situation”

**Lumba Siyanga, Programmes Co-ordinator, Women for Change, Zambia**

“When I was coming to Russia, I had very low expectations, because I know that the environment for Civil Society in Russia is not the best one. But then when I was at the consultation there was actually a very vivid engagement from officials, from the foreign ministry... what the Russian CSOs did was they used the Open Forum consultation as a vehicle to promote their multi stakeholder dialogue with the Russian government... The feedback that I had after the consultation was that the Open Forum has really helped the Russian CSOs to make their case to the Russian government”

**Franz Joseph Berger, Aid Effectiveness Co-ordinator, CONCORD, Belgium**

## **Appendix 2: Bibliography**

Follow these links to find out more about the Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness

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[International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness](#)

[Advocacy Toolkit](#)

[Implementation Toolkit](#)

[National Consultation Reports](#)

[Thematic Consultation Reports](#)

[BetterAid Platform](#)

[Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness](#)