

# The misconceptions of donors are hobbling civil society work

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Actions of most donors are driven significantly by their notions of how people, communities, systems and societies change. This is natural and understandable. These notions form the basis of their beliefs about what kind of interventions, programmes or efforts are worth supporting. This in turn directly influences the priorities and work of civil society organizations (CSOs) whose work is funded by these donations. These notions are more pronounced among corporate social responsibility (CSR) donors than philanthropic donors, and have become a major problem in the CSO ecosystem.

This is the third in a series of columns about donors—what they should be careful with, given that their actions play a profound role in shaping the CSO landscape. Much of what I write is based on our own experience and mistakes as a large donor, as well as from what we observe in the behaviour of other donors and its effects on CSOs—a term that includes non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs) and other kinds of not-for-profit organizations working for societal improvement and helping support the vulnerable.

How can the notions of donors about changes in individuals and society lead to significant problems in the CSO ecosystem? For all their good intentions and often genuine efforts to engage CSOs in dialogue, too many donors (not all) have notions that are unreal.

What are these notions and how does this phenomenon work? Three kinds of ‘unrealisms’ are rife among donors.

First, donors want to see predictable and certain outcomes when, in reality, the causes and pathways of change in people, systems and societies are plagued with uncertainty, unpredictability and unintended consequences. If they were to consider their own selves, or the neighbourhood, or the organization where they work, donors would acknowledge that it is hard to figure out what precipitates change, how change happens, and when, in individuals or groups of people. Communities and societal systems are infinitely more complex. But when it comes to funding programmes or interventions in these communities and systems, they want to see predictability and certainty. Even those who grasp this matter intellectually find it hard to accept it in action.

The second kind of unrealism is intertwined with the first and magnifies it; it has to do with time frames. Donors almost always expect shorter time frames for change than what is practical or possible—and which in itself is contingent on a host of factors.

The third unrealism is about the impermanence of change. No change in a community, system or society is permanent or sustainable by itself. Energy, struggle and support are required continually to sustain any change. But donors tend to believe that their CSO partners must achieve ‘sustainable change’ once and for all, and then exit.

Among the many reasons why no change is permanent, two are fundamental. One, that even if change is achieved, it’s within a microcosm of the overall system or society, and the rest of the system/society is influential enough to push back. For example, Dalits achieving equality in many villages doesn’t mean that the places around will not have an influence on those villages. Two, there are always other forces and dynamics at work in society which can purposefully or accidentally undo all progress. Do we need any starker example than the decline of democracy in many countries? Truly, ‘eternal vigilance is the price of liberty’, a piece of wisdom often mis-attributed to Thomas Jefferson, and a riff on which is equally true—eternal struggle is the price of the good and just.

Few donors would deny problems with these notions when confronted with them in theory. But equally rare is the donor who can avoid these in practice and act on the basis of what is required. Perhaps it is a function of money being their instrument of change that distances them from reality. In the final decisions, this weighs in as ‘what do we get for what we give?’—drowning out the simple fact that their money and the efforts it supports are a small part of complex societal processes. What problems is this causing in the CSO ecosystem?

Interventions and programmes are becoming shallower, narrower and shorter. Not enough interventions attempt to address issues at the core, and certainly not complex issues. Donors want certainty, predictability and speed—that’s what they fund. And so that is what CSOs design and run; that is where the money is. CSOs too are complicit in this decay of meaning of their own work. Too many, too often, are too ready to tailor their actions to what the donor wants—while knowing fully well that compromises undermine their work and its true efficacy.

In aggregate, this is diminishing the real contributions of civil society to India. The rise of CSR donors has exacerbated these problems.

The solution is simple conceptually but difficult to implement. Because it is about people changing themselves. CSOs should develop more courage to stand up for what is right. While the greater onus is on donors; a large dose of humility in striving for wisdom would be a good start for us.

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