Lessons learned from supporting the development of a network of networks for advocacy in the Global South

My experience in the management team for the Empowering Civil Society Networks in an Unequal Multi-Polar World Programme (ECSN BRICSAM) – by Thomas Dunmore Rodriguez
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About the author

Thomas is a dual Mexican/British national who now lives in Mexico City. For the past three years, he has been working as Deputy Manager for the ECSN global programme which supports CSO networks in the BRICSAM countries. He has recently changed role, and is now influencing adviser with a specific focus on Latin America. He is passionate about supporting the work of social movements which mobilise around a human rights and social justice agenda, and feels that too often the voices of people involved and leading such movements are not heard within international development circles.

Partnering for Impact series

To do the work it does, Oxfam works closely with partners at all stages of the programme, in all kind of contexts: humanitarian, influencing, development, etc. But what does it mean for our staff? Each day brings new challenges and opportunities, so how do they do it? Following a reflective and productive write shop, this Partnering for Impact series was developed to share and explore learning from experienced practitioners about what it takes to “work well in partnership”.

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Left, For richer or poorer? This report was commissioned by civil society networks across the BRICSAMIT countries.

Previous page: Morro do Papagaio at Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil. Photo: Fred Cardoso
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BRICSAM refers to Brazil, Russia, India, Indonesia, China, South Africa and Mexico. It is an acronym used by Oxfam that refers to the group of emerging economies that are likely to become increasingly important not only due to their growing economic size, but also their political weight in multilateral institutions. These seven countries are also home to the majority of people living in poverty in the world – around 2.5 billion people living on less than $5 a day live in just these seven countries. Oxfam also recognizes that this set of countries hosts diverse and vibrant civil societies that have the potential to achieve change not just at their respective national levels, but also in their regions and globally. Since the start of the ECSN BRICSAM programme, Turkey and Indonesia have been added to this grouping within Oxfam, which is now referred to as the BRICSAMIT. In five of these countries Oxfam has an established presence through a national Oxfam affiliate.

ECSN Empowering Civil Society Networks in an Unequal, Multi-Polar World is a programme currently funded by the European Union and Oxfam. The acronym ECSN BRICSAM is used in this document when referring to this programme.
Introduction

Oxfam regards working with partners as central to its model of change. While Oxfam is an organization with a strong global and international presence, working within networks and with other civil society organizations brings significantly more depth, outreach and legitimacy to its influencing work.

Oxfam needs to respond to shifts in the global balance of power by developing its ability to influence the governments of the emerging powers, particularly BRICSAM. More than ever, it must also look for ways to help strengthen existing civil society networks in these countries, and develop links between them. This should be a core strategy to influence global processes in which the governments play a key role, and have the potential to act as progressive forces for more just regional and global development.

The ECSN4 BRICSAM programme demonstrates the value of working as part of a truly global network, with capacity and legitimacy to influence the governments of the emerging powers. It provides important learning for Oxfam in terms of its proposal to build a worldwide influencing network.

Oxfam and partners have found that there is still a significant gap in the capacity of civil society from emerging powers to engage in South-South dialogue and to work in a coordinated way to influence their governments in the international sphere. In terms of civil society participation, international spaces continue to be dominated by large international NGOs. Representation from the Global South in the international sphere tends to be from business sectors or academia, and far less from civil society.

This is also the case at the national level, in that in most of the BRICSAMIT countries, business has much greater influence over relevant ministries and officials leading policy negotiations at the international level than civil society. Given the increasing importance of BRICSAM governments in global decision making processes, it is vital that the voices of people living in poverty and suffering from the grave inequality in these countries are also heard.
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The ECSN BRICSAM programme builds on this opportunity for a solidarity movement in the Global South to engage in global-level advocacy, and specifically aims to support a coalition of seven national civil society network partners – one in each of the BRICSAM countries – to do the following:

a) Strengthen mechanisms for participation of civil society in global forums, such as BRICS and G20.

b) Influence the agenda in these global forums.

c) Achieve changes in policy within global forums to the benefit of poor and marginalized people not only in the BRICSAM countries, but also around the world.

Each network has its own local and national membership base, together constituting an international network of networks. The purpose of this is to engage collectively and influence policy making at global policy making forums, such as BRICS and G20. This is delivered via active working groups on issues related to inequality, such as access to health, food systems, economic models and gender. In each of the BRICSAM countries, Oxfam’s role is to lead the capacity development efforts with each of the seven civil society networks, providing intelligence and advocacy approaches, and sharing its own experience of engaging with the G20, BRICS, and other global processes. The current programme phase is funded by the European Union.

This paper seeks to highlight learning from the successes and challenges of developing a network of networks across countries in the Global South.

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Ostashkov market, Russia. Street-sellers offer a small range of goods that require little or no capital outlay. Photo: Geoff Sayer
Key achievements

Leadership in Global Forums from the Global South

Through the programme, seven national civil society networks have been able to position themselves as civil society leaders from their respective countries at the global level. They now provide crucial links between certain international institutions and the voices and concerns of their constituencies at the grassroots level.

Representatives from partner networks have taken up leadership roles in BRICS and G20 civil society dialogue processes. During the 2015 Civil 20 process – the official space for civil society participation within the G20 – they co-led thematic working groups on inclusive growth, gender, sustainability and taxation. At the Civil BRICS summit in 2015, the Russian network was part of the steering group for the summit, and as a result, was able to lead a panel to discuss inequality, an issue that had not been on the original agenda for the summit. Both Civil BRICS and C20 declarations were presented to high-level government officials. In the case of the C20, this was presented to, and well received by, the Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey, the seat of the G20 presidency in 2015.

Deepening understanding of inequality

Inequality has become the key common thematic thread for the ECSN civil society networks. As several BRICSAM governments increasingly speak of the need to reduce inequality, the networks have been able to challenge the approaches taken by their countries where necessary and emphasize the need to tackle the structural drivers of the problem. The main ways of achieving this have been through research pieces, position papers, direct advocacy with governments and participation in global forums. For example, the networks were able to lead a key joint piece of
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research, *For Richer or Poorer: The Capture of Growth and Politics in Emerging Economies*. This research draws out trends causing concern regarding the concentration of income and wealth in the BRICSAM countries, and the political implications this has. This work is innovative in that it has enabled the network of networks to build its own narrative, led from the Global South, on the nature and implications of inequality in this set of countries. This pool of learning from a South to South, civil society perspective is an important contribution to global debates around inequality. It also yields potential to influence the positions of BRICSAM governments as they continue to take on leading roles within global governance and new global financial institutions.⁹

Joint advocacy achieving change

ECSN partner networks have engaged in joint advocacy at a series of global processes, namely BRICS in 2014 and 2015, the G20 process in 2014 and 2015, the Financing for Development conference in Addis Ababa in 2015, and the Sustainable Development Goals Adoption Summit in New York. This has enabled the ECSN network partners to gain considerable knowledge on how global policy making processes work, and how to get some form of citizen voice and a more diverse set of ideas and perspectives into these meetings. The ECSN network of networks played a crucial role in establishing both the C20 and Civil BRICS processes, as channels for participation from civil society in the Global South, and within these processes, ECSN was

Caarapó Municipality, Brazil. Photo: Tatiana Cardeal
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Central to civil society calls for reducing inequality to be at the centre of the agenda. In fact, in 2015, the Turkish presidency of the G20 made inclusive growth a core theme, and commended the participants of the C20 for their work and positions on this issue. As with many forms of advocacy it is impossible to attribute this to ECSN alone. However, we are clear that a contribution to this process was made.

Building links from local to global levels

Each of the networks has held a series of outreach activities at the national level. This has helped their constituencies to understand how the particular discussions and decisions taken within BRICS and the G20 impact their national-level work, and in several countries the ECSN partner network has become the key convenor of civil society for input into these global processes. Critically, this is opening up a typically closed space to allow for alternative views, ideas and perspectives to be considered. In Brazil, Indonesia and South Africa the civil society networks now hold regular discussions with representatives from their respective foreign ministries, a key entry point in order to influence the position of their governments at BRICS, the G20 or other global institutions. In these three countries, they are considered the “go to” civil society interlocutor on issues related to global engagement and foreign policy.
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Lessons learnt: Network management – Oxfam’s role

The network formation stage is crucial

The way in which networks are formed is crucial. In this case, the ECSN BRICSAM network was formed through a selection process led by Oxfam, based on its long-standing relationships with partner networks in each of the BRICSAM countries. This process was not conducive to the rapid formation of a global network of networks because for most of the member networks, it was the first time they had collaborated, and it took considerable time for them to get to know one another’s political positions and ways of operating, and therefore to build trust. A more flexible process involving potential network partners and considering their pre-existing links would probably ease the formation stage. A clearer and perhaps more detailed set of selection criteria would also help to ensure that each member was engaging more or less from the same level or starting point. These aspects would also help ensure that all network members consider the decision making process around selection sufficiently democratic. Beyond this, a clearer inception process, by which each member of the network of networks took ownership of the programme design, but also signed up to a kind of “MoU” with each of the other network members would be important.

The importance of getting internal mechanisms for accountability right

Linking organizations and national networks from seven different countries implies working across very different contexts and levels of capacity. It is unrealistic to expect each network member to be at the same level to engage with global advocacy. Clarity on differing levels of experience and ability needs to be established – otherwise, varied levels of expectation can lead to considerable frustration. Secondly, it is important for a suitable governance structure to be in place within the network, so that it is the collective itself which holds individual members...
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  Vegetable plot, West Timor, Indonesia. Photo: Tom Greenwood

  to account for delivering on specific roles and tasks within the network. Traditional, more top-down accountability mechanisms, such as the donor-recipient relationship, are not conducive to a true networked approach, which should be more horizontal. The experience of ECSN BRICSAM shows that this is, perhaps, one of the most difficult aspects of network building to get right. Even though an autonomous steering committee with one member from each network was established, the funding relationship managed by Oxfam meant that, in reality, there has always been a degree of dependence on decision making from Oxfam’s side. There is a tension between delivering on the financial and programme management side, and providing an autonomous space for network members to take independent decisions and to hold each other mutually accountable for taking the leadership of the network forward.

  **An autonomous space to set the agenda is vital**

  Within ECSN BRICSAM one of the first things the global programme unit (based within Oxfam) did was to set up a steering committee, composed of one senior representative from each of the networks. While Oxfam played the role of facilitator of this committee, this space was the main decision making body for the direction the network should take. In this case, in an attempt to protect the space for partner networks to lead on the strategic direction of the initiative, Oxfam did not participate as a member of the steering committee. However, our learning is that most of the other networks would have been happy for Oxfam to be part of this, if not as an equal member, with a clearly defined and mutually agreed formal role including aspects such as programme management, facilitator of capacity development, and in some cases as political partner. Clarity on each stakeholder’s role, including Oxfam’s, as either a facilitator or full network member, should be agreed from the outset. If Oxfam is to be a full network member, then...
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as for all members, individual roles and responsibilities need to be made explicit, preferably through a written document, such as a terms of reference. Without such transparency, it is more likely that Oxfam will be seen to be having a more manipulative, “behind the scenes” role, even if this is not the intention.

The network secretariat role is important and needs to be agreed upfront

Throughout the three years that ENSN BRICSAM has been running, Oxfam, through the global programme unit, has operated as a de facto secretariat for the network, ensuring that regular communication is maintained, and deliverables stipulated by the donor agreement are completed. Nevertheless, an official decision for the global programme unit to take on this role was never made by the steering committee. Recognition that a secretariat is needed, and the choice of who acts as a secretariat is a key decision and should not be assumed. If the managing entity for a funded project is also the de facto secretariat, this can lead to certain tensions. They are two entirely different roles: one is ‘treasurer’ and the other is ‘chairperson’ and they should not be merged if the network is to be autonomous and sustainable. The management of a funding relationship is not necessarily conducive to a role in network building or leading advocacy. These are very different functions.

It is important for Oxfam to reflect with the network members on the implications of its particular relation to the network – as a funder as well as a donor contract manager, as facilitator, as political partner – and to decide with the members what the best option for Oxfam’s role and for the network structure should be. Clearly this can be different in each network depending on context, capacities and needs. If Oxfam is to take on more than just the management of the funding relationship, then this needs to be decided by the network itself and formalized clearly as a joint decision.

Ekaterina Konstantinova, 76, selling cranberries at the edge of the road outside Ostashkov market, Russia. Photo: Geoff Sayer
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Lessons learnt: Network development – accountability and sustainability

Networks need time to evolve

Networks are complex and they need time to develop. True networks are not linear processes. There will be times when networks have intense activity, and there will be other times when members will retreat to their own individual agendas. This should not be cause for concern. However, with the pressure of external funding and the drive to show constant results, tension can clearly occur. In ECSN BRICSAM, the rhythm of the deliverable outcome set out in the proposal and the timelines presented to the donor were, in hindsight, too ambitious. Specific activities, resources and sufficient time allocated to network development to ensure strong communication and decision making processes for the network would be helpful to consider, particularly for a complex, cross-country network of networks like this one.

There should be clarity on the network’s main function

Achieving a clear understanding of the network’s functions is imperative. Within ECSN BRICSAM, the overall focus was clearly to build a cross-country network for advocacy in global forums, and as such to amplify the voices of the constituencies of each of the seven national partner networks. Oxfam attempted to strengthen the network as a community of practice for learning. However, the value of such attempts was limited, as it was clear that the main focus for network representatives remained the global advocacy engagement. Such attempts for learning need to be closely tied to the central aim of the network; otherwise there is a risk that the true function of the network becomes unclear.

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Efforts should be made to ensure representation of women, different ethnic groups and geographic regions

It is important to build in opportunities for network members, particularly member organizations representing women, different ethnic groups and different geographic regions, to take part in as many of the network’s activities as possible in a meaningful way. Even though in ECSN BRICSAM, partner networks generally had considerable national outreach in their own contexts, the question as to how representative of women, different ethnic groups and different regions they are is complex. Many have members who represent such groups, but in practice these groups may not be highly engaged with network activities, or represented in the network’s leadership or secretariat. Effective communication and consultation with such groups is sometimes lacking. The need for resources to strengthen internal communication and encourage active participation from a broader range of network members, particularly those representing marginalized groups, must be considered a key priority in work to support civil society networks. This needs to be balanced with ensuring the best person for leadership and advocacy roles is selected, to avoid tokenistic gestures of participation from marginalized groups. For example, those networks that earmarked funds for holding national assemblies and local-level consultation processes appear to have been able to encourage more active participation from a broader set of network members. This is not just about participating in activities, but actually being supported through a longer-term capacity development process so that they are actually well placed to take on leadership roles within the network in a meaningful way. Another limiting factor, specific to international engagement, is language. Members who do not speak English are less likely to be willing to travel to international meetings that are to be held in English, even if translation is provided.
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**Sustainability should be decided by network members, not simply by the availability (or lack) of funding**

A key factor in the long-term sustainability of a network is clarity on the network function and a joint agreement that the function is still required. Ultimately the sustainability of the networks needs to be defined by the network members, not by the availability of funding. For ECSN BRICSAM, the seven networks have clearly demonstrated an interest in continuing with the initiative, despite the imminent end in funding from the original donor. A test will be to see what success there is in mobilizing further resources, not only from Oxfam’s side, but also from all network members involved. This need not only be funds. Simply a commitment to dedicate staff time to the network activities is already a huge commitment and speaks well of the level of sustainability achieved.

Photo: Oxfam India
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A common challenge facing INGOs which decentralise and set up new national affiliates, as Oxfam is doing in several BRICSAMIT countries, is how these new organisations can raise their own profile, and funds, as nationally registered organisations, without crowding out partners, potential partners and other members of civil society networks in these same countries. This relates to the possibility of the new organisations becoming integrated into national-level civil society networks, and participating as a national organisation in national debates. A commitment to a networked approach for new nationally registered organisations, for advocacy but even for fundraising, would hold

Children play around a waste water canal, Masephomolele township, Cape Town, South Africa. Photo: Zed Nelson
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Significant potential for these organisations to establish themselves in a new kind of way in BRICSAMIT contexts, as equal members of civil society.

Another tension is in the approach to undertake advocacy in itself. Within global forums, like the BRICS and G20, Oxfam often adopts an ‘insider’ approach in that it prioritizes engagement in formal, invited spaces for civil society within such spaces. On the other hand, within the ECSN partner networks there is strong interest in also continuing to occupy ‘outsider’ or claimed spaces, such as independently organized ‘people’s forums’, even if they have no direct channel of dialogue with government representatives. This is particularly the case where there is suspicion about the motives for the official spaces for participation – for example the Civil BRICS process, which was largely led by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – or where civil society organizations question the legitimacy of the global forum in itself – as is the case for some of the network members in relation to the G20, which they see as an informal and illegitimate grouping of the world’s most powerful countries that ultimately undermines other multilateral institutions that are more inclusive and democratic, such as the UN.

As part of a broader civil society movement for change, Oxfam needs to remain open to these other approaches and political positions. This is a key part of what working with others and within networks means: being prepared at some points to step back and let others define the agenda and lead. This is a powerful move, and would bode well for Oxfam’s aspiration of building a truly worldwide influencing network.
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2 A ‘writeshop’ is an intensive, participatory process that brings together experts and process facilitators under one roof to produce simple, user-friendly materials in a short period of time.
3 BRICSAM refers to Brazil, Russia, India, Indonesia, China, South Africa and Mexico. It is an acronym used by Oxfam that refers to the group of emerging economies that are likely to become increasingly important not only due to their growing economic size, but also their political weight in multilateral institutions. These seven countries are also home to the majority of people living in poverty in the world – around 2.5 billion people living on less than $5 a day live in just these seven countries. Oxfam also recognizes that this set of countries hosts diverse and vibrant civil societies that have the potential to achieve change not just at their respective national levels, but also in their regions and globally. Since the start of the ECSN BRICSAM programme, Turkey and Indonesia have been added to this grouping within Oxfam, which is now referred to as the BRICSAMIT. In five of these countries Oxfam has an established presence through a national Oxfam affiliate.

It includes countries with a medium human development index and a low human development index.
6 BRICS is an acronym for the informal grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. BRIC, without South Africa, was originally coined in 2003 by Goldman Sachs, which speculated that by 2050 these four economies would be the most powerful in the world. The inaugural BRIC summit took place in Russia in 2009, which the four heads of government from the BRIC countries attended. Annual leaders’ summits have been held since. South Africa was added to the grouping in 2011, creating BRICS.
7 The G20 is an informal group of 19 countries and the European Union, as well as representatives of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The finance ministers and central bank governors of these countries began meeting in 1999 at the suggestion of the G7 finance ministers in response to the global financial crisis of 1997–99. Since then, there has been a finance ministerial meeting every autumn. Since 2008 the leaders of the G20 countries have also held an annual summit.
8 Civil G20 is a meeting for policy dialogue between the political leaders of the G20 countries and representatives of civil society organisations working on the issues related to the agenda of the G20 Summit. The goal of the Civil G20 meeting is to facilitate exchange of ideas and opinions about the agenda of the G20 Summit and discuss pertinent issues of relevance to civil society, with a view to making substantive contributions to policy formulation based on the civil society assessment of the main agenda and issues of the G20 Summit.
9 For example the BRICS New Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.
Lessons learned from supporting the development of a network of networks for advocacy in the Global South

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email programme learning team at programmelearning@oxfam.org.uk

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