

“Building a more enterprising CDRA”: transcending blurred boundaries between organisations and sectors

The Community Development Resource Association (CDRA), a civil society organisation based in South Africa, is finding that the traditional organisational forms that previously justified funding in South Africa are disappearing. Civil society space is evolving quickly, ushering in many opportunities, threats and challenges, not least a contracting resource base. This is reshaping the contributions, roles, relationships and value of civil society.

The challenges are not universal, however. Civil society in South Africa comprises a vibrant, wide-ranging group of organised, formal groups as well as unorganised, informal formations. A focus on the funding of civil society must appreciate this diversity. The NGO community, where organisations such as CDRA are located, is a small part of civil society. However, it is the segment that is more dependent on external aid.

The impact of the contracting resource base has been particularly severe on the organised part of civil society that has become part of the funded development industry. Diminished funding flows to civil society led to the closure of many NGOs, and also introduced staff rationalisation and retrenchment into NGOs. The informal segments of civil society have been less impacted, as the voluntary means through which they are sustained has been relatively unscathed.

Similar to many other South African NGOs, CDRA is actively exploring new means and revenue streams to resource its work. Inevitably, this brings us to reposition ourselves in relation to those who control resources – government, corporations, major foundations, small private foundations, and individual philanthropists. CDRA is actively questioning whether the new means and resourcing strategies will compromise our sovereignty, identity, creativity and legitimacy.

The options for resourcing our work and sustaining our contributions have their pros and cons. Working with government

on national development programmes will open access to resources that we have not benefited from before. But we fear that we may become merely implementers of government programmes and our social change agendas will be undermined. We are afraid that we would compromise sovereignty, legitimacy and creativity and be subject to demands for measurable, verifiable outcomes. So is this a viable resourcing option for CSOs?

On the other hand are the business corporations and the social enterprise models they promote. Exploring this as a resource also has problems. In South Africa, corporate social investment provides funding tailored to the thematic focus areas and social projects of business. While we can access programme funding from businesses, this has to be connected to their focus areas. Essentially, corporate funding remains restricted funding. However, in the bigger picture, corporate social investment funding is substantial and contributes to the development of our society.

We are experiencing that donors are no longer interested in simply providing financial support to a sector or group; being part of civil society and the NGO community is no longer a good enough basis for being funded. Also, we can no longer assume that being a social purpose organisation is all it is about; these days many businesses have clearly articulated social purposes. Increasingly, we need to explain our unique contribution and value to societal development.

As our traditional funding relationships with allies in Europe and the United States come to an end, we find that as intermediary organisations whose work is not directly with communities, exploring different means of resourcing our work is challenging. For CDRA, providing organisational accompaniment support services remains an important revenue source. However, in the depressed economic environment, there

are limitations on this income. We are complementing our self-generated income with programme funding from mainly local and foreign private foundations. These foundations, not previously a source of funding for us, are much more amenable to support social change and social justice work.

In exploring new means of resourcing, while continuing to embrace essential civil society values, we recognise the need to build an organisation that is premised on a different financial logic. We talk about “building a more enterprising CDRA”; a shift away from the NGO ‘recipient’ mentality, orientation and way of engagement. We have to accept that the traditional ‘donor / recipient’ relationships are part of our past. Building a more enterprising CDRA is not about becoming business-like; it is about restoring creativity and imagination to our work.

We have moved beyond working via relationships with individual CSOs; we are increasingly working with complex organisational systems. As new organisational forms are blurring the boundaries between organisations and sectors, we are increasingly drawn to work in multi-actor processes and spaces. The traditional organisational forms that justified our funding are disappearing. Today we are facilitators, accompaniers, supporters, innovators and mentors; and this is increasingly appreciated by new funders.

To ensure longer-term sustainability, we have to transcend the traditional organisation and sector boundaries that have, for a long time, limited who we work with and how we work; we have to challenge ourselves to engage with the multi-actor world and work in spaces where multiple connections and complex webs of relationships are common. The ability to work in a more integrated way across a shared space is proving vital.

Nomvula Dlamini, Director, CDRA
nomvula@cdra.org.za