



LEARNING BRIEF

STRENGTHENING LOCAL SYSTEMS:

LESSONS FROM GOAL'S ORGANISATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT APPROACH WITH CIVIL
SOCIETY PARTNERS



Irish Aid
An Roinn Gnóthaí Eacnamaíoch agus Trádála
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) play a vital role in humanitarian and development responses but often face capacity gaps that limit their effectiveness and long-term sustainability. To address this, GOAL's Global Partnership Centre (GPC), with support from Irish Aid through Ireland's Civil Society Partnership (ICSP), partnered with Future Options Consulting Ltd, a Kampala-based firm with extensive experience supporting NGOs, government agencies, and private sector organisations across East Africa. Together, we co-developed an Organisational Development (OD) Framework and Toolkit in 2025. This collaboration combined GOAL's programmatic insights with Future Options' OD expertise to create a practical, evidence-based framework that enables CSOs to assess their organisational capacity, identify priority areas for growth, and design tailored capacity-strengthening plans.

The OD Framework provides CSOs with a structured yet flexible process to reflect on internal systems, pinpoint gaps, and track progress over time. The accompanying Toolkit translates the framework into practice through self-assessment tools, a scoring rubric, capacity indicators, and templates for planning and monitoring. Together, these resources help CSOs generate an evidence-based picture of their strengths and weaknesses, engage teams and stakeholders in meaningful reflection, and embed a culture of continuous improvement. This ensures that capacity strengthening is structured, measurable, and most importantly, partner-led and sustainable.

Between March and September 2025, eleven CSO partners across eight countries—AFAA, TENN, HiHFAD, COC, FOKAPAWA, A2N, Facilitation for Innovations and Sustainable Productivity, VEDCO, CODDEFFAGOLF, CORDUPAZ, and NGO ADKOUL, piloted the Framework and Toolkit in South Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Niger, Sierra Leone, Syria, Colombia, and Honduras.

DATE

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THEMES

Localisation and Organisational Development

AUTHOR

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LOCATION

Global

DONOR

Irish Aid

PARTNER(S)

1. ALLIANCE FOR ACTION AID (AFAA),
2. Energy Nexus Network (TENN),
3. Hand in Hand for Aid and Development (HiHFAD),
4. Center of Concern (COC),
5. Forum for Kalongo Parish Women Association (FOKAPAWA),
6. Africa 2000 Network Uganda (A2N),
7. Facilitation For innovations and Sustainable Productivity,
8. Voluntee Effort For Development Concern (VEDCO),
9. The Committee for the Defense and Development of the Flora and Fauna of the Gulf of Fonseca (CODDEFFAGOLF),
10. The Development and Peace Corporation of Córdoba and Urabá (CORDUPAZ),
11. NGO ADKOUL

INTERVENTION DATES

March-September 2025



The CSOs were selected through a structured process: GPC asked country programs to nominate at least two strategic partners for potential participation in the OD pilot, accompanied by a business case for each. After reviewing the submissions, GPC identified 11 partners to join the pilot based on alignment with programme priorities and readiness for organisational development.

Early results show that the approach is fostering honest self-reflection, strengthening governance and accountability, and enabling partners to take greater ownership of their organisational development journeys. Several CSOs have already introduced reforms in governance, financial management, safeguarding, and human resources. The pilot confirms that when capacity strengthening is partner-led rather than externally imposed, it generates deeper engagement, stronger ownership, and more sustainable results.

KEY MESSAGES

- The OD Framework enables CSOs to drive their own development, fostering ownership and long-term sustainability.
- Validation workshops strengthened credibility, encouraged honest reflection, and produced more reliable results.
- Embedding OD within partnership cycles is essential for scaling and sustaining localisation efforts.
- The Framework's influence extends beyond GOAL: other agencies, such as GIZ, have begun using assessment findings to inform their own support, as seen during the FOKAPAWA inception meeting.

ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK APPROACH

GOAL's OD Framework is designed as a partner-driven process rather than a donor-driven assessment. At its core is the Organisational Capacity Assessment Tool (OCAT), a structured tool that allows CSOs to examine their strengths and weaknesses across eight key domains - Governance and Leadership, Program Management and Monitoring and Evaluation, Operations and Infrastructure, Sustainability and Resource Mobilisation, Compliance Management, Human Resource Management, Finance Management and Partnerships and External Relations

The process unfolds in several stages. First, CSOs complete a self-assessment, scoring themselves against the Organisational Maturity Levels—Emerging, Basic, Functional, and Sustainable, which outline different stages of maturity across each domain. These scores are then reviewed in a facilitated validation session, where partners and facilitators examine the evidence, challenge assumptions, and ensure that the results accurately reflect reality. Based on this, CSOs may either develop their own Capacity Strengthening Plan (CSP) or work together with partners and facilitators to co-create one, identifying practical actions to address priority gaps. Progress is subsequently tracked through periodic reviews, with reassessments conducted every 6–12 months.

ORGANISATIONAL MATURITY LEVEL	
Sustainable	≥80%
Functional	≥60% < 80%
Basic	≥40% < 60%
Emergent	>40%

By putting CSOs in the driver's seat, the framework promotes ownership, transparency, and sustainability. It also embeds a culture of reflection, enabling organisations not only to meet immediate donor requirements but to strengthen themselves for long-term impact.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE OD TOOLKIT

- Organisational Capacity Assessment Tool (OCAT)
- Scoring Rubric and Capacity Maturity Model
- Organisational Capacity Indicators
- Capacity Strengthening Plan (CSP) Template and Progress Tracker
- Facilitation Guide

OD PROCESS:



The Global Partnership Centre (GPC) played a central role in guiding the development of the OD Framework, providing technical leadership, coordination, and quality assurance throughout the process. Beyond framework design, the GPC worked closely with GOAL country offices to ensure alignment with local contexts and needs. Country teams and the GPC supported CSO partners before, during, and after the OD process, facilitating orientation sessions, accompanying partners through the self-assessment, and providing follow-up coaching and mentoring. This sustained support has been critical in helping CSOs translate assessment findings into practical action plans, embed learning within their organisations, and maintain momentum on their capacity strengthening journeys.

EARLY OUTCOMES

Although the pilot was only concluded in September 2025, tangible changes are already emerging. Several CSOs acted immediately on their self-identified priorities, without waiting for additional resources from GOAL.

- In South Sudan, AFAA introduced an independent audit mechanism to strengthen accountability and financial transparency.
- In Uganda, FOKAPAWA formalised human resource policies, including written contracts and clear job descriptions, improving fairness and staff retention.
- In Syria, HiHFAD developed a safeguarding framework to better protect staff and programme participants.
- Across multiple partners, board governance was strengthened, with more regular meetings and clearer decision-making procedures.

These reforms illustrate the potential of the framework to trigger meaningful organisational change in a short period. They also highlight a key insight from the pilot: when organisations define their own priorities, they are more motivated to act on them.

KEY LEARNINGS

"THE TOOL HELPED US SPEAK HONESTLY ABOUT OUR WEAKNESSES WITHOUT FEAR OF JUDGMENT. IT SHOWED US WHERE WE WANT TO GO AS AN ORGANISATION."

— CSO Partner, Sierra Leone

PARTNER OWNERSHIP IS NON-NEGOTIABLE

The pilot confirmed that genuine ownership is the foundation of effective organisational development. When CSOs led their own assessments, they were more willing to acknowledge weaknesses and commit to reform. In Uganda, FINASP recognised that its board members were not being formally evaluated, an important element of good governance practice, while in Colombia, CORDU-PAZ voluntarily lowered its governance score after recognising that board meetings lacked formal minutes. Both organisations noted that these admissions would have been unlikely in a donor-driven audit. This openness built trust within teams and with GOAL, strengthening accountability and laying the groundwork for more sustainable reforms.

Across the eight countries, partners consistently described self-assessment as a rare opportunity for candid internal dialogue. In Sierra Leone, TENN highlighted that junior staff raised governance concerns for the first time, while in Ethiopia, COC acknowledged weaknesses in multi-year budgeting, forecasting, and projection, gaps that had previously gone unaddressed. On average, organisations adjusted their self-ratings in at least five of the eight domains, demonstrating that structured reflection encouraged honest critique rather than defensive scoring.

The impact was evident within weeks: over 60% of participating CSOs began implementing reforms within three months, and seven out of 11 took action in the first six weeks, without waiting for external resources. Compared to past donor-led assessments, which partners often described as "tick-box exercises," the OD Framework fostered genuine ownership that translated quickly into tangible change.

ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (OD) TRIGGERED POSITIVE ATTITUDE CHANGE.

FOKAPAWA's experience showed that the OD process can drive meaningful attitude and behaviour change. Through the Organisational Capacity Assessment (OCA), the organisation identified priority areas, set clear goals, and strengthened internal systems to support sustainable growth. The process also encouraged open dialogue, teamwork, and stronger leadership commitment—key ingredients for long-term resilience.

FOKAPAWA now views OD as an ongoing journey rather than a one-off exercise. By adopting OD practices, the organisation has embraced change as an opportunity for learning and renewal. This shift in mindset has enhanced overall performance and positioned FOKAPAWA to adapt proactively to evolving internal and external challenges.

SKILLED FACILITATION ANCHORS CREDIBILITY

Self-assessments created valuable space for reflection, while facilitated validation sessions ensured results were accurate, evidence-based, and credible. In Uganda, for example, VEDCO initially rated themselves highly on safeguarding. However, through facilitator-led discussion, they acknowledged gaps, such as the absence of formal reporting channels and revised their score downward. This illustrates how facilitation balances optimism with realism. Across the pilot, scores shifted by an average of 3–7% after validation, with a net downward adjustment of 1.52% overall. The typical change, whether upward or downward, was about 4.44%. These adjustments, though modest, highlight the critical role of facilitation in keeping the process “honest,” as partners consistently reported. This reinforced confidence in the results, both internally and with external stakeholders. Although online validation was necessary during the pilot, given multiple geographies, in-person validation at CSOs' offices will be more effective. On-site sessions allow facilitators to directly review documents, systems, and processes, strengthening accuracy and accountability. Therefore, whenever possible, validations should be conducted on-site.



FLEXIBILITY ENHANCES RELEVANCE

The eight domains of the OD Framework were broadly applicable across contexts, but partners stressed the importance of local adaptation. In Syria, HiHFAD re-framed safeguarding indicators as “staff protection” to better fit cultural and organisational realities, while in South Sudan, AFAA emphasised financial transparency in terms of accountability to communities rather than just donors. These adaptations ensured the framework resonated with staff and reduced resistance. The evidence shows that when tools are applied flexibly rather than rigidly, they generate higher engagement and more meaningful reflection, without losing their overall structure.

FOLLOW-UP IS ESSENTIAL FOR LASTING CHANGE

The pilot highlighted that OD cannot be a one-off event. In Niger, ADKOUL began drafting HR manuals but expressed concern that progress would stall without continued coaching. Similarly, board members of CODDEFFAGOLF in Honduras noted that while they quickly improved governance practices, “momentum could fade” without structured follow-up. Evidence from GOAL’s previous capacity-strengthening work supports this concern, showing that improvements plateau if not revisited within 12 months. Partners themselves called for peer learning and periodic reassessment every 6–12 months to sustain momentum. The lesson is clear: without coaching and follow-up, early progress risks fading before reforms become institutionalised. Honest Reflection Generates Ownership.



Dr. Nandanann Kannan Pulakkal, CEO, Future Options Consulting Ltd, noted:

“GOAL’S COMMITMENT TO LOCALISATION, EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES, AND REFLECTION ENSURED THAT THE FRAMEWORK BECAME A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR CSOS TO BUILD RESILIENCE AND LONG-TERM EFFECTIVENESS.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Embedding the OD Framework into regular partnership cycles, through onboarding, mid-term reviews, and close-out phases, will ensure that organisational development becomes a routine practice rather than a one-off exercise. Light-touch facilitation and peer exchanges will be particularly valuable for partners new to OD concepts, creating space for learning without undermining ownership. GOAL will also continue to aggregate lessons across contexts to inform programming while maintaining the principle that CSOs must define and drive their own priorities. For future rollouts, flexibility will remain essential: the toolkit will be applied in ways that respect the diversity of partner contexts, with coaching and cross-partner exchanges sustaining momentum. Together, these measures will strengthen ownership, deepen learning, and ensure that organisational development contributes meaningfully to localisation in practice.

NEXT STEPS

Building on the early success of the pilot, GOAL will consolidate lessons from the eight participating countries into a refined and standardised version of the toolkit, while ensuring it remains adaptable to different partner contexts. The framework will be scaled across GOAL’s partnership portfolio in line with our localisation strategy and donor commitments. To measure long-term outcomes, follow-up assessments are planned for 2026, enabling partners to track growth and adapt their capacity strengthening plans as needed. Crucially, GOAL will embed organisational development into the full partnership cycle, making it a routine, continuous process rather than an ad hoc intervention. This will ensure that capacity strengthening is partner-led, sustained over time, and deeply contributes to equitable and locally owned development outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The pilot demonstrates that when capacity strengthening is led by CSOs themselves, supported by facilitation and follow-up, it creates the conditions for lasting organisational change. Partners are already reforming governance, strengthening systems, and embedding accountability measures that will make them more resilient and effective.

GOAL's OD Framework is not just a toolkit, it is a pathway towards more equitable, sustainable, and locally owned partnerships. By continuing to invest in this approach, GOAL and its partners can contribute to stronger local systems and more effective development outcomes.

"THANK YOU FOR OPENING OUR EYES. ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING WILL MAKE US SUSTAINABLE AND ABLE TO SUPPORT OUR COMMUNITIES FOR YEARS TO COME." — FOKAPAWA, Uganda



ANNEX

Figure1: Organizational Development Framework





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