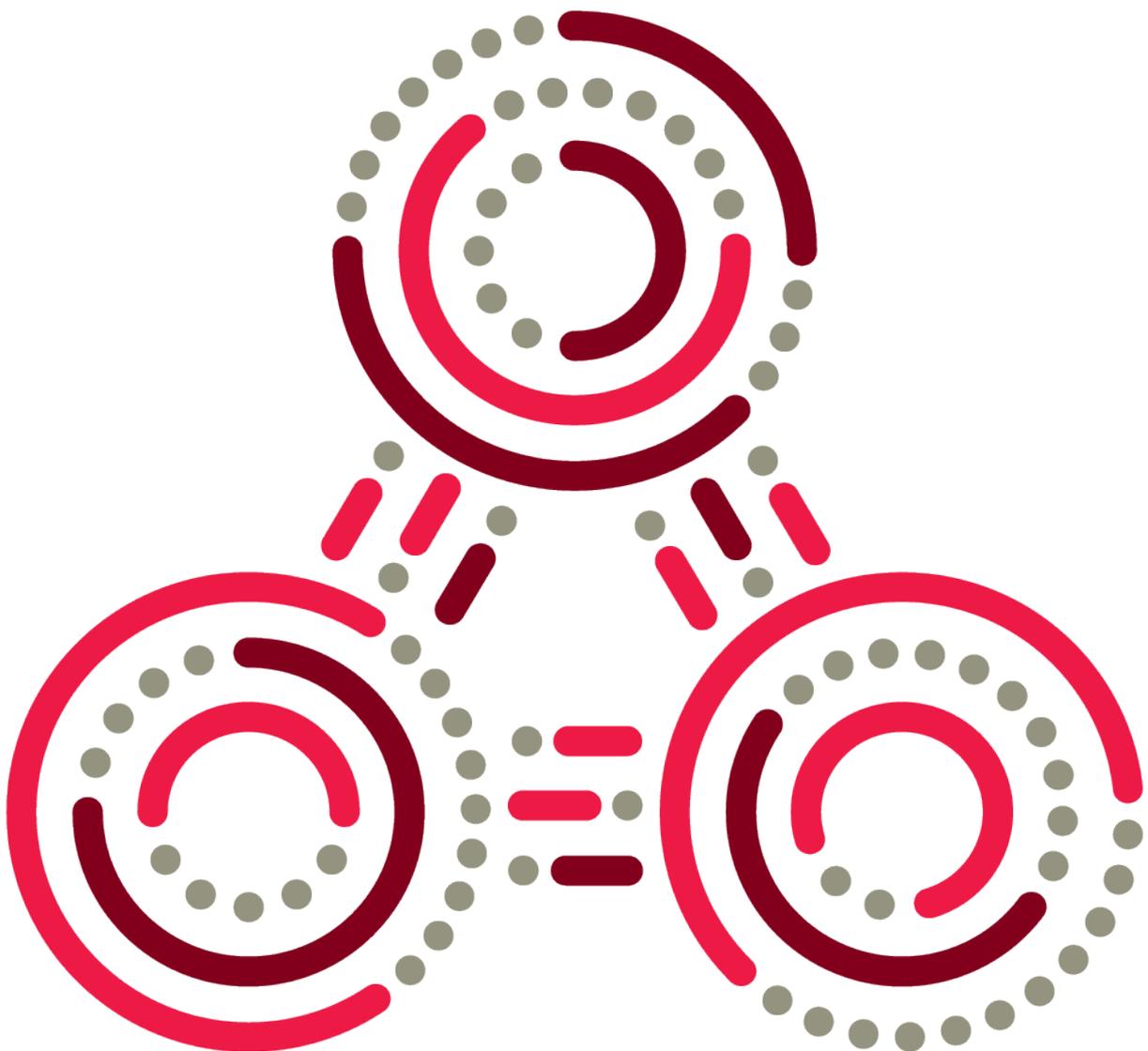


Options for maximising UK- European civil society collaboration in a Brexit context



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About Bond

Bond is the civil society network for global change. We bring people together to make the international development sector more effective. bond.org.uk

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Summary

European Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are facing many internal and external challenges that are undermining their effectiveness. Brexit will further damage the sector with UK CSOs having less of a formal role within the EU.

Enhanced cross-national cooperation for CSOs at the European regional level and beyond is essential for the future function and place of CSOs in society. To foster closer and strengthened UK-European CSO collaboration in the lead up to and following Brexit, the following options should be considered:

Vision and purpose

- **Define a vision and compelling narrative** that promotes global solidarity, multilateralism, and democratic public accountability. This will provide a frame and mandate for CSOs, and will create greater political space to achieve common development and humanitarian goals.
- **Intensify collaboration on priority issues** to protect development norms, standards and objectives (with a focus on poverty and effectiveness principles) in aid-related development policy. The goal would be to integrate a cross European effort to champion aid and development more forcefully in public.

Practical action to build collaboration

- **Establish training exchanges** through sharing learning, tools and techniques in areas like governance and effectiveness, fundraising and donor management, using new technology, and new media, sharing methodology, toolkits etc.
- **Establish a European CSO Erasmus programme** where staff can be identified for exchanges on the basis of strategic placements or building skills and expertise where gaps exist, and learning to take new skills to share with the sector at home.
- **Build a European activists network**, joining CSO national activists' groups and mobilising around one common cause and a goal that resonates with European and global citizens.
- **Build flexibility for consultancy/sub-contracting CSO services** by building on the principles of consortia programmes through sub-contracting functional tasks to CSOs outside the consortia.

Ways of working in a Brexit context

- **European, not EU, CSOs** should collaborate as a wider Europe, beyond EU-specific policy, with CONCORD being open to non-EU CSO membership, but CONCORD should concentrate mainly on EU specific issues.
- **National platform collaboration** should cover wider European strategic development for the development and humanitarian CSO sector.

Options for maximising UK-European civil society collaboration in a Brexit context

The report proposes options for UK-European¹ civil society organisation (CSO) collaboration in the lead up to and following the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (EU). The analysis informing these options is based on 15 telephone interviews with a cross-section of representatives from European development non-governmental organisations (NGOs), national platforms, NGO families with a presence in Brussels, Bond members, and experts on EU development and humanitarian issues.

The report examines the current political and economic context across Europe, and the operating environments for European NGOs/CSOs². It analyses the opportunities and challenges for EU development and humanitarian civil society organisations (CSOs) created by Brexit. It then proposes options for collaboration to maximise impact in driving an ambitious international development and humanitarian agenda within the prevailing conditions.

It is important to summarise the effects of Brexit for the work of many Bond members, and EU CSOs more broadly.³ As a member of the EU, the UK government and CSOs are able to directly or indirectly influence EU institutions and processes in policy-making and implementation. This covers the spectrum of policy in which UK CSOs are heavily invested: development, humanitarian, external trade, agriculture, environment, tax, investment, foreign and security policy.

As the UK is a contributor to the EU Budget and Funds (e.g. the European Development Fund (EDF)), UK CSOs are eligible to influence how those funds are spent, but can also access specific budget lines for funding their programmes. Effective EU policy influencing and fundraising requires working in close collaboration with EU CSOs. This situation will remain until March 2019 when the UK is set to leave the EU, but thereafter as things currently stand,⁴ UK CSOs will no longer be eligible to access EU mechanisms for advocacy or fundraising.

Until the UK leaves the EU, UK CSOs should ideally intensify engagement with EU policy and institutions, and collaboration with EU CSOs as if the UK is a full and active member of the EU. By doing this together, EU CSOs can secure the best policy and practice outcomes for the sector following Brexit, while building new forms of collaboration following Brexit.

¹ Note the use of EU CSOs and European CSOs throughout. EU CSOs refer to those CSOs based in EU member state countries, while European CSOs refer to CSOs based in the broader geographical region of Europe. The use of EU and European is carefully chosen depending on the context used i.e. EU CSOs is generally used in the context of EU institutional-related references.

² The interviewees are all representatives of formally recognised NGOs, but will be referred to as civil society organisations (CSOs) throughout this report. NGOs form a part of the CSOs broader group of organised civil society (which also includes activists, academics, think-tanks etc.), with whom NGOs work closely – and may also perform these roles – and are also relevant to this report.

³ See Bond research papers: The impact of Brexit on UK and EU international development and humanitarian policy; and, The impact of Brexit on EU funding for UK CSOs, for further details on this.

⁴ There is likely to be a UK-EU withdrawal transition period of two years (or more), but it is unlikely that the UK government (and UK representative organisations) will have any formal role in policy-making. There also exists a possibility of continued UK-EU partnership in funds and budget lines like the European Development Fund (EDF), and the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO).

Context

Brexit is just one of the big events shaking the foundations of the EU. It is symptomatic of a wider trend of populist nationalism and austerity sweeping the continent that is variously damaging many EU countries. The ensuing political shift presents a direct challenge to European CSOs' global-based values and purpose. The notions of multilateralism, global solidarity, and citizen empowerment are being squeezed out of public debate. CSOs are experiencing government funding cuts as a result of austerity measures. In some countries, governments are taking repressive action against CSOs by cutting funds, and applying legal restrictions to reduce their ability to hold governments and public institutions to account. In many countries, this is undermining CSOs' effectiveness in defending against retrograde government policy, and the sector's success in driving progressive action at home and abroad.

European CSOs are adapting to this new reality by concentrating more on implementing donor funded programmes to maintain size and income, or survive. Falls in unrestricted core funding have reduced CSOs' resources and flexibility to innovate or collaborate in public campaigning. Instead, they engage increasingly in strategic partnerships with official donor agencies and/or other private partners (private sector, foundations, NGOs, not-for-profit etc.), and in so doing are increasingly becoming instruments of donor-led development agendas.

A further consequence is that CSOs are more cautious in publicly challenging the development and humanitarian policy of the governments and organisations that fund them. CSOs in some countries also fear that, by campaigning on aid and development issues, they might provoke negative media or public response in the current environment.

The upshot of these changes is a sector that is in the midst of an existential conundrum. The sector is in need of revamping itself to be a strong and effective force for change within the changed European and global realities. Otherwise, it will become more difficult to safeguard existing norms and standards, and secure progressive change. Once public policy and practice is worsened, it is also always difficult for CSOs to recover lost ground (or the status quo ante). CSOs need to develop a compelling, value-based narrative that resonates with their constituencies and validates their added value in society. They need to push boundaries to create the political space to enable them to influence policy. Strengthening collaboration with allies across Europe is more necessary now than ever to rebuild a powerful force that achieves positive development impacts.

This background goes beyond the scope of this paper, but it is essential to mitigating Brexit-related challenges, and identifying opportunities and options for UK and European CSO collaboration. The following section concentrates on the three areas which were investigated over the 15 interviewees, covering:

1. the challenges and opportunities for UK and EU CSOs in the lead up to and following Brexit
2. the current external and internal challenges for European CSOs
3. future options for collaboration for European CSOs, and the role for Bond, CONCORD and others.

Challenges, opportunities and options created by Brexit for European CSOs

A number of interviewees initially responded that Brexit will not make much difference to collaboration between CSOs (particularly platforms and families) overall. For a number of EU CSOs, Brexit – and its impact on CSOs and their work - is not an immediate, nor their biggest, concern. This is because either collaboration will continue as before, particularly on non-EU specific international issues; or they have little sense of what Brexit means at an institutional, or policy level; or they do not work regularly with UK CSOs to be significantly affected.

Overall, everyone agreed however that Brexit is a retrograde step for multilateralism, European and EU cooperation broadly, and CSOs (UK and European) generally. Nevertheless, digging down to specifics, a number of significant challenges and opportunities did emerge from the interviews.

Challenges

- **On EU-specific policy:** The poor flow of information and analysis on Brexit is effecting policy processes that EU CSOs are engaged in, such as the multi-annual financing framework (MFF), the European Development Fund (EDF), and Cotonou. Brexit is stalling EU negotiations on these issues, and it is difficult to develop proposals and strategy when the UK's future role is unknown. It would be helpful to know the UK CSOs' advocacy agenda on Brexit and these issues, and to get information on the UK government's plan. It is fully understood, however, that information on Brexit is difficult to extract from the UK and the European Commission (EU institutions).
- **On advocacy:** UK CSOs have traditionally had a strong and powerful voice in policy and advocacy. Like the UK government, they have been an effective influencing force at the European level, promoting a progressive development agenda (e.g. poverty focus and aid effectiveness) in close collaboration with like-minded countries. UK CSOs have been a reliable source of good quality research and policy analysis, and pioneered effective strategies for CSOs engaged in influencing the EU. The departure of UK CSOs from that work will leave a serious gap in capacity and resource, particularly if UK CSOs turn inwards and become preoccupied with, or constrained by, the UK political context.
- **On EU funding:** UK CSOs not being partners in EU consortia projects is a cost to EU partners. Collaboration on EU funded projects lead to valuable outcomes, including impact gains from shared learning and capability-building, information and analysis exchange, and extending reach to wider publics. Without the capacity of UK CSOs, there will a net loss on consortia projects.
- **On capacity-building and resource-sharing:** UK CSOs, and Bond specifically, have provided capacity-building support for other CSOs (e.g. within CONCORD membership) in areas like improving effectiveness (results-monitoring, evaluation, governance etc.), sharing materials (toolkits, research and analysis, campaign material packages to respond to hostile media), fundraising expertise, and development education collaboration. It is important to continue to collaborate in these areas. This requires UK CSOs to continue to invest in building expertise and skills in these areas.
- **On UK CSOs as global campaign initiators and drivers:** UK CSOs have been at the forefront of many of the global CSO-led campaigns, for example: Jubilee 2000, and trade, climate, and tax justice campaigns. Brexit should not negatively impact on UK CSOs' ability to drive ambitious global campaigns.

- **On UK government withdrawal:** The UK government has traditionally been a progressive leader and innovator in international development, working well with UK CSOs. Having a separate development ministry has enabled it to publicly champion development over the past two decades, notably enshrining the UK's commitment to spending 0.7% gross national income (GNI) on official development assistance (ODA) in law. Dialogue and information exchange between the UK government, EU institutions and governments, and UK and EU CSOs has been key to improving development effectiveness across the donor community, and in promoting aid to European publics. The departure of one of the biggest and most influential EU donors will reduce the size, relevance and impact of development policy and spending within EU external policy and beyond. Coordination among EU donors is likely to be weakened too (at country level, and in official political and international fora), since the UK will become a lone government, no longer party to common EU positions, groupings etc. UK CSOs (and UK media, academics, politicians, public representatives etc.) will, as a consequence, be in the same position i.e. outside EU consultations, accreditations etc., and unable to co-ordinate and co-strategize with EU allies to influence EU policy positions.

Opportunities

- **Redefining of UK-European relations:** An external systemic shock like Brexit compels UK CSOs (and the UK government) to spend necessary time and attention in redefining existing relationships with European CSOs (and EU institutions). It requires being conscious of the added value of those relationships, doing an inward-assessment of existing strategies and ways of working, identifying common goals and values and developing new, innovative and effective strategies to achieve impact through collaboration.
- **Rebalancing of UK-European CSO relations:** A diminishing role for UK CSOs at a European level will enable CSOs from other member states to assume some of the space vacated, in terms of influence over policy formulation, advocacy messaging and strategy, media and public communications, and European Commission (EC) funded programming. While losing a strong, capable and effective force in these functional areas is a net loss to the sector overall, it should have some benefits in EU CSOs strengthening capacity and capability in those areas. It may also result in more progressive messaging, policy and narrative emerging from those non-UK CSOs. A more progressive agenda may emerge from less vocal but progressively-minded governments (e.g. the Nordics, Ireland etc.).
- **Shifting focus on other international fora:** Bond and UK CSOs will naturally shift their resources to influencing non-EU international institutions and fora if they no longer have direct influence on EU institutions, such as the Development Assistance Committee (DAC), the Bretton Woods institutions, UN bodies, G7, G20, and the Commonwealth bodies. This is positive in that UK CSOs can intensify efforts on holding these institutions to account, but can share more information and analysis with European CSOs for their related work on these institutions or related EU positions.
- **Re-engage on EU external policies:** Bond and UK CSOs still have a stake in influencing policy-making until at least March 2019 - and in the EDF and ECHO for beyond that if the UK continues to fund those budgets following Brexit. The objectives for external relations spending for the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), currently being defined, are also important to influence since they will impact donor and development contexts, standards and norms. There is a risk the EU will link more aid to progressing EU security, migration, and commercial objectives. UK CSOs should want to resist that and maintain EU aid's focus on fighting poverty and delivering development outcomes. Rather than disengage from Europe, UK CSOs should deepen engagement until Brexit is over.

- **Improved co-ordination in fundraising, advocacy, learning and sharing:** To maximise influence at a global level, UK CSOs will need to invest in working in alliances and with social movements. It is probable that the UK will subscribe to EU common positions in international fora (i.e. EU plus UK plus Norway etc.). Co-strategizing to influence an alliance of governments might result in securing stronger positions that better serve CSO goals. Close coordination should also involve effective use, distribution and sharing of resources (learning, information sharing, capacity-building, fundraising etc.) across CSOs whether within or outside the EU. However, on the downside, UK CSOs (like the UK or Norwegian governments adopting EU positions) will share the same experience of non-EU European countries like Norway: you have limited influence in defining EU CSO positions because you are outside the process, but have to use the positions that EU CSOs have developed (for capacity, consistency and solidarity reasons).

External and internal challenges for European CSOs

The various internal and external challenges facing CSOs across Europe are covered in the context above. It is important to realise that across Europe there are a diversity of development and humanitarian CSOs. CSO representative bodies (national platforms, families and networks) vary widely, and CSOs' operating environments and political contexts are very different. Development CSOs in some countries are adapting to deep funding cuts (e.g. Finland, Spain, Ireland), or are concerned that new legislation in some EU countries (e.g. France, Italy, the UK) may place constraints on the operating environment for CSOs. The CSO platform in Hungary has faced the most hostile government reaction to criticism when it raided their offices and closed them down. In Sweden and Germany, however, funding remains buoyant, relations and engagement with the government is good, and the public and media is generally supportive (although the political situation is volatile and this could easily change in months to come). European CSOs do however face common challenges.

- **Absence of counter-narrative:** European CSOs lack a compelling and current counter-narrative to the emergent xenophobic, nationalist, populist agenda that is shifting political and public discourse, closing the public space for international development and humanitarian interests and voices.
- **Weak alternative policy propositions:** Linked to the absence of a values-based framing for a new world view, CSOs are struggling to formulate alternative coherent and persuasive propositions to development objectives being subsumed by EU donors' national self-interested strategic objectives (e.g. security, migration, commercial expansion). This is also because CSOs have not yet invested sufficient resources into developing positions on these areas, or have chosen not to publicly challenge them.
- **Funding constraints:** Increasingly, donor partners are selected on the basis of technical competence, and CSOs are less agents for change, and more instruments for implementing a donor's agenda. To counter an increasing trend towards CSO 'instrumentalisation', and working within the confines of a donor's agenda, CSOs need to be sufficiently confident to set their own agendas. This may require CSOs favouring to partner with donors that allow that independence, or require more innovative approaches – or sometimes CSOs choosing instead to work outside donor-led programmes to maintain their independence. In addition, falls in government funding has led to EU CSOs seeking primarily restricted funds from private sector donors and partners, foundations, and trusts.

Restricted funds may include requirements that skew CSOs' resources away from existing priorities, or partners' objectives may not fully match.

- **Insufficient co-operation with potential collaborators and use of new technology:** European CSOs that do not survive funding cuts are those that are failing to innovate, adapt to the new reality, or take risks. New CSO actors are emerging, like pop up CSOs, or new global or regional social movements (eg Africa Rising Movement) to fill the space of more traditional CSOs. Some adopt new technology for public engagement, or to build an effective activist base. There is also insufficient cross-sectoral CSO coalition building or collaboration.

Options for UK-European CSO collaboration

Given this background, it is certain that enhanced cross-national cooperation for CSOs at the European regional level and beyond is essential for the future function and place of CSOs in society. This section proposes options for collaboration in three areas:

1. Vision and purpose
2. Practical action
3. Ways of working.

These options require further discussion across the European CSO sector, and need to be realised with agreed action and task plans. This process could start with the launch of this report at a roundtable held in Brussels. Such an event would follow the series of consultation processes (e.g. the CONCORD Roundtable, held in September), as part of this wider research programme.

Vision and purpose

- **Define a vision and compelling narrative:** European CSOs need to collaborate in defining a visionary narrative based on promoting global solidarity, multilateralism, and democratic public accountability. This will provide a framing for CSOs to establish their purpose, role and added value within society. Having a big, bold, challenging values-based narrative also creates greater political space for CSOs in which to speak out – it provides a mandate. It will also provide a framework to help build policy positions and public communications to more effectively respond to the paradigm shift in international development resulting from the changing European and global context. CONCORD national platforms are planning to meet to agree a common response to the challenges they face. Adopting this narrative should be an outcome of that process.
- **Intensify collaboration on priority issues:** Collaboration is demand-driven, and is more likely to take shape if there is a commitment to common causes and goals. The interviewees identified short- to medium-term priorities for collaboration. Most urgent is protecting norms, standards and development objectives (focus on poverty, effectiveness principles) in aid-related development policy. European CSOs should join together in a cross European effort to champion aid and development more forcefully in public (this has been effective in Denmark with its Positive Change campaign). This requires being equipped to make an evidence-based, progressive case for effective aid spending generally, but should address the shortcomings in development policy that is used to serve donor self-interest. This is needed to gain public support for aid and development, and to

secure a more progressive development agenda among European donors at bilateral and multilateral levels (including the EU MFF negotiations, and the DAC). Having information and analysis on the impact of the UK's withdrawal from the EU is essential to developing responses in these areas. Bond should present to European CSOs how UK CSOs plan to respond to Brexit (eg one or two national platforms might welcome Bond presentations on Brexit plans at events they host).

Practical action to build collaboration

It was recognised that Bond and other UK CSOs had significant resources and learning to share with European CSOs and it would be important not to lose that capability within the sector. It was also acknowledged that UK CSOs could learn from other European CSOs in these areas too. To build and tighten cooperation and collaboration, it is important to share and exchange through practical engagement, which includes:

- **Establishing training exchanges:** this includes capacity-building through sharing learning, tools and techniques in areas like governance and effectiveness (monitoring, evaluation, learning, transparency and accountability), fundraising and donor management, using new technology and new media, sharing methodology, toolkits, and learning from effective research, case study development, advocacy and public communications materials.
- **Establishing a European CSO Erasmus programme:** where staff can be identified for exchanges on the basis of strategic placements or building skills and expertise where gaps exist, and learning to take new skills to share with the sector at home (assuming post-Brexit visa conditions allow). This could be through platform to platform exchange, or secondments between European CSOs more generally.
- **Building a European activists network:** CSO national activists groups or networks could be linked to build a cross-European network. Unifying such a network should be developed, at least initially, on mobilising around one common cause and goal that resonates with European and global citizens. Activism would need to be linked to CSO policy and advocacy, which would strengthen CSOs's distinct role of holding governments to account. This might be an initiative that the International Forum of National NGO Platforms (IFP) or CIVICUS could lead.
- **Strengthening development education:** UK CSOs must continue to collaborate with European CSOs on development education to enhance the sense of European cooperation working for global solidarity.
- **Building flexibility for consultancy/sub-contracting CSO services:** To help strengthen cross-European programme-level collaboration, CSOs should build on the principles of consortia programmes by sub-contracting functional tasks to CSOs outside the consortia. Similarly, where donors award substantial grants to their national CSOs, those national CSOs can consider commissioning technical services or capacity from CSOs outside the national sector.

Ways of working in a Brexit context

All CSO representatives agreed on the following terms of UK-European engagement and ways of working following the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

- **European, not EU, CSOs:** CSOs identified themselves more as being European entities rather than EU entities, bound together by geography, shared economic, social and political histories of

development, cultures and values. It is therefore natural to collaborate as a wider Europe beyond EU-specific policy.

- **Non-EU European platforms should be members of CONCORD:** Irrespective of Brexit, Bond must remain a member of CONCORD, and other non-EU European platforms should join CONCORD if they so wish. The CONCORD secretariat should, however, concentrate on EU specific issues. While non-EU members may not be able to directly influence those positions at an EU-institutional level, EU policy will still indirectly impact on non-EU countries and CSOs' interests.
- **CONCORD national platforms collaboration:** European national platforms (with European-based families, networks etc.) should however collaborate on wider European strategic development for the development and humanitarian CSO sector. Brexit would hasten the need for cross-European collaboration – particularly in determining a vision for European CSOs working in development and humanitarian response. This will also require closer collaboration with the IFP, and CIVICUS etc.

Conclusion

When Brexit eventually happens, it will result in a weakening of the overall impact of EU CSOs' ability to influence EU-specific policies. UK CSOs have a long and established tradition of being a strong and effective force for change in the EU and Europe more widely, so their reduced role will hurt the sector. However, Brexit is but one of the serious challenges faced by CSOs in a number of European countries. Building a common unifying vision and purpose, and strengthening collaboration across European CSOs is as necessary to mitigate the damage on CSO influence by Brexit, as it is to countervail an emergent political consensus from further retrogressing development cooperation, and weakening development and the role of CSOs. For the future health of their sector, European development and humanitarian CSOs should invest in building on unifying and collaborating as a sector so its strength and influence is greater than the sum of its parts.

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