

Rethinking Donor Engagements



Civil society organizations' recommendations for more equitable partnerships grounded in local realities

WHY THIS DOCUMENT?

Intended for civil society organizations, this document has been designed as a shared advocacy tool aimed at structuring and advancing joint recommendations to donors. Organizations may use it, in whole or in part, to inform their institutional dialogue and strengthen their capacity to hold partners accountable. Donors, including Sidaction, are also encouraged to refer to it in order to improve their practices, enhance the quality of partnerships, and create more enabling conditions for the implementation of field-based activities.

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EDITORIAL

At a time when international funding for the fight against HIV is declining — whether due to uncertainties surrounding PEPFAR or cuts to official development assistance in Europe, particularly in France — we, civil society organizations (CSOs), are witnessing a dangerous step backward. These cuts are weakening our programs, threatening essential services, and placing increasing pressure on our teams. They also expose the structural dependency embedded in the current international aid model. Instead of strengthening our community-based responses, this system perpetuates the precariousness that undermines our ability to act sustainably.

In West and Central Africa, we often remain as the last line of defense for our communities. Yet we operate within an aid system that keeps us in structural precarity: **72% of our organizations report being in survival mode.** This fragility is driven by rigid, short-term project funding that imposes an excessive administrative burden. The result is a deep imbalance: **48% of our teams feel treated as mere implementers,** barely involved in designing the projects that are nonetheless carried out in our name.

Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are key examples of this disconnection. In countries where difficult contexts already undermine access to basic services, the rigidity of funding mechanisms becomes a moral failure. Inadequate procedures hinder emergency responses, while abrupt funding withdrawals — without transition strategies — leave communities behind. Expecting civil society organizations (CSOs) to absorb these risks alone is unsustainable. Flexibility is not a luxury; it is a survival requirement.

Nearly twenty years ago, the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness set out the principles of local ownership and mutual accountability. On the ground, these commitments often leave a hollow ring. Mistrust and procedures have replaced trust, which is the cornerstone of any partnership: **63% of our teams believe that donors do not trust them.** Unilateral and top-down accountability remains, assessing us without enabling reciprocal assessment, preventing genuine systemic improvement.

The time for diagnosis is running out: we need action. We call for an urgent rethinking of our relationships with donors, so that we can move beyond this paralyzing model and regain greater autonomy in leading actions that serve our communities.

We require a shift:

1. **From surveillance to trust:** donors must move beyond bureaucratic control towards a genuine culture of trust.
2. **From rigidity to agility:** they must drop administrative rigidity in favor of flexibility that responds to the unpredictability of crises.
3. **From project-based to sustainable support:** they must stop funding short-term projects and invest in our organizational sustainability.
4. **From unilateral accountability to shared responsibility:** they must transform top-down accountability into genuinely mutual responsibility.

The survival of our organizations depends on it, but the stakes are far greater. The effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, and the very spirit of international solidarity are at stake. Let us live up together to the challenges we face every day.

VICTOR GHISLAIN SOME, BURKINA FASO

INTRODUCTION

As crucial frontline actors, civil society organizations (CSOs) are key partners for donors in the implementation of international solidarity projects and programs. They fill gaps in public services, facilitate access to care for the most vulnerable populations, provide continuous care and support, conduct advocacy activities, generate and share data to adapt interventions to ground realities. As such, they actively contribute to fighting pandemics and to strengthening health systems.

Despite this central role, organizations face major structural challenges linked to donor funding management: increasingly burdensome administrative and financial requirements, complex procedures, inadequate risk management policies, difficulties in accessing appropriate funding, limited flexibility in funding mechanisms, and a lack of sustainable core funding. Combined with the overall decline in available resources, these constraints hinder their development, restrict strategic reflection, and limit their ability to act.

In the specific context of the HIV response in West and Central Africa (WCA), these challenges get a particular significance. On the front line of the response, CSOs play a central role in ensuring access to care, delivering essential health services, fighting stigma and discrimination, and carrying out community-based education and awareness activities.

To answer the recurring concerns raised by its international partners, Sidaction launched in 2023 an in-depth reflection on the impact of donor funding practices on CSOs. This process began with a literature review documenting the obstacles encountered, analyzing their causes, and identifying the main structural issues at stake.

Based on this work, a study was conducted among Sidaction's African partner organizations to collect and analyze the difficulties they face in implementing their projects. Data collection took place in 2024 and involved 17 WCA-based associations. In the first semester, four different anonymous questionnaires were distributed remotely to different professional groups: management & finance, programs, medico-psychosocial, and data management. In the second half of the year, eight online interviews conducted with 33 individuals from organizations of varying sizes and profiles helped further understanding. The entire process was designed to guarantee freedom of expression and transparency: no names of individuals or organizations were recorded.

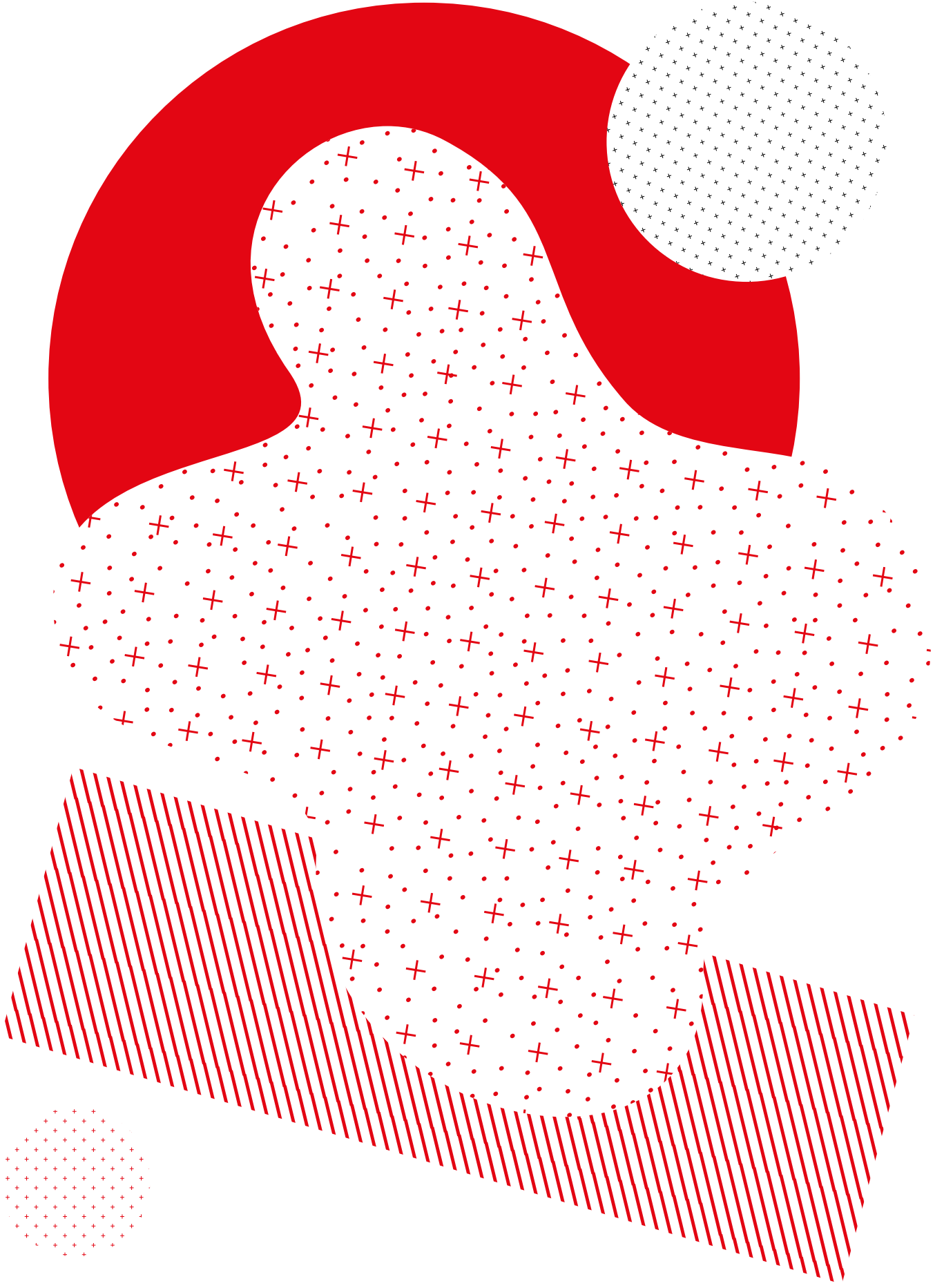
In February 2025, a webinar was held to share and discuss the initial findings with all participants. In May, a regional workshop organized in Lomé (Togo) brought together 16 partners from 12 countries. The objective of this workshop was to translate the study's findings into operational recommendations. It enabled participants to collectively identify the most relevant funders' practices, analyze the structural obstacles encountered in the field, and articulate a shared vision of the changes expected from donors.

Following this workshop, this position paper was developed. It compiles, structures, and formalizes all the recommendations co-constructed with partners, with the ambition of outlining what could be an "ideal donor".

Of course, the findings of the study and the recommendations do not fully apply to all donors: each funder has its own constraints and specificities, its strengths, and areas for improvement. Each donor is therefore free to adopt what is relevant to them. This work does not aim either to present Sidaction as a role model for donors: several recommendations also apply to its own practices. The objective is rather to contribute to a collective response aimed at improving funding modalities, strengthening accountability, and better aligning administrative and financial requirements with operational realities, taking into account the imperatives of the donors themselves.

This document has been designed as a shared advocacy tool. Organizations can use all or part of it to support their institutional dialogues. Donors, including Sidaction, can also refer to it to improve their practices, enhance the quality of partnerships, and create better conditions for field operations. They can initiate discussions with the funded organizations on desired areas of improvement. This document can serve as a basis for such discussions, providing a shared assessment of the partnership.

Finally, it should be noted that the data collection was carried out before the announcements of U.S. funding cuts affecting USAID. Far from making this work obsolete, these developments have only reinforced the relevance and urgency of the recommendations presented in this document.



FINDINGS

The study's findings first highlight the extremely precarious financial situations faced by associations. The survey conducted by Sidaction* across four professional profiles shows that **72% of respondents in management and finance positions consider their organization to be in a precarious financial situation or in survival mode.**

Regarding funding, the study indicates that 13% of management and finance respondents report that the majority of their donors do not cover the most significant organizational costs (beneficiary-related activities, salaries, overheads). For most of these respondents, over the past five years their organization's funding has either decreased (52%) or come to an end (44%). This situation constitutes a major obstacle to their sustainability, autonomy, and long-term planning capacity. Due to overall instability, declining funding, and increasing dependence on external donors, associations struggle to maintain financial viability and continue delivering their health and social missions.

From a technical perspective, many associations report lacking the necessary support and resources: they face difficulties accessing training, capacity-building initiatives, tools (manuals, procedures, templates), equipment (medical and logistical), and technologies (software, servers, stable internet connectivity) required to optimize their operations. Strengthening their financial and data management systems would also enable them to better meet donor requirements.

Beyond the constraints affecting day-to-day activity management, associations regret that these factors limit their ability to innovate and adapt to an ever-evolving context.

In terms of human resources, associations face significant challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff. These difficulties stem from limited budgets, project-based funding that prevents the long-term stabilization of positions, and competition from other organizations or sectors offering more attractive remuneration. It should also be noted that, during project implementation, some donors impose consultants who are not from the country concerned — sometimes Western consultants.

Faced with these challenges, the time CSOs must devote to fund management and fundraising excessively encroaches on their core activities, to the point where organizations are unable to achieve their strategic objectives. It therefore becomes urgent and essential to safeguard their financial stability and operational effectiveness by rethinking donor-CSO relationships, to help establish more fair, equitable and sustainable partnerships.

* Study on challenges faced by associations related to donor practices [Available in French only]

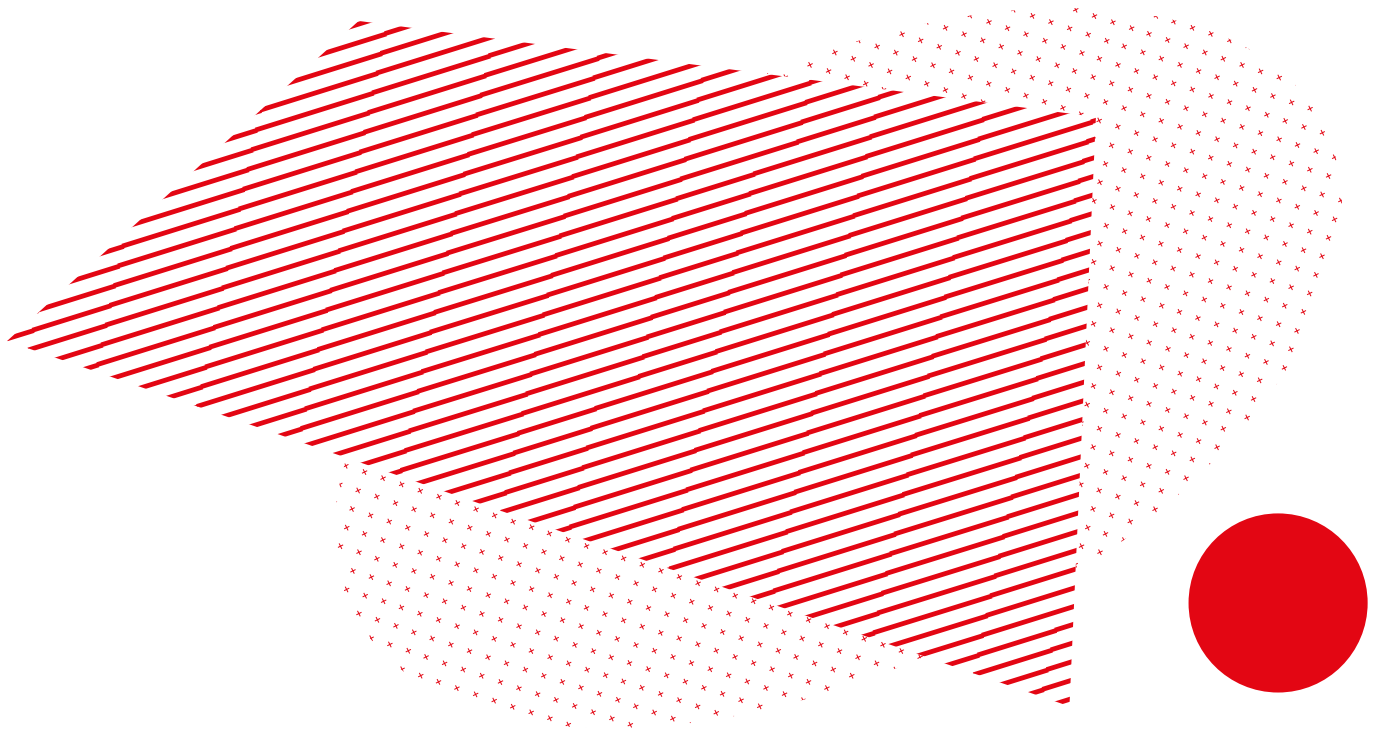
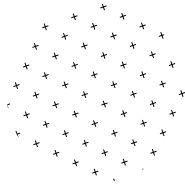
«Donors do not give organizations the opportunity or the choice to present projects that are best suited to the current needs; instead, they come and force us to implement their project».

RECOMMENDATIONS

Adopted in 2005, the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness laid the foundations for an approach designed to strengthen the impact of international aid funding. Built around five principles — ownership, alignment, harmonization, managing for results, and mutual accountability — it called for more coherent, predictable, and locally driven funding modalities.

Twenty years later, findings from the field show that these principles still struggle to be fully translated into funding and partnership practices. The gaps observed between stated commitments and their concrete implementation highlight the need to continue and deepen collective efforts toward more balanced relationships between donors and civil society organizations. It is within this perspective that the recommendations below are developed. They aim to contribute to the evolution of funding practices, in a spirit of dialogue, co-responsibility, and continuous improvement of partnerships. These recommendations are structured around five complementary pillars:

1. **Recognize and value the expertise of civil society organizations** by fully involving them in the design and implementation of projects, so as to respond to their expectations, needs, field realities, and beneficiaries' priorities;
2. **Establish appropriate financial and administrative management modalities** that accommodate rigor, flexibility, and sustainability, while taking into account the capacities and operational contexts of associations;
3. **Ensure favorable and context-appropriate working conditions** by guaranteeing access to the technical, human, and financial resources necessary for the implementation of projects and activities;
4. **Guarantee horizontal, transparent, and continuous communication** in order to build balanced partnerships based on trust, respect, listening, and shared accountability throughout the collaboration;
5. **Anticipate funding shifts and withdrawals** by supporting transition strategies aimed at preserving continuity of action and organizational sustainability.



(1) RECOGNIZE AND VALUE THE EXPERTISE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

As part of the study on challenges faced by associations related to donor practices, consultations conducted with civil society organizations (CSOs) revealed that their involvement in project design and evolution remains very limited. This prevents the integration of field-based needs into the strategic and operational direction of interventions. Opportunities for adjustment are also constrained by inflexible

procedures. These difficulties are equally visible in monitoring and evaluation processes, where the involvement of data staff remains limited due to insufficient coordination and participation in decision-making. Moreover, CSOs are rarely the owners of the data generated through projects, which limits their ability to use, analyze, and mobilize this data to inform internal strategy and guide their actions.

«We are rarely consulted during the design phase; decisions are made first, and then we are asked whether we can serve as implementing partners».

Study on challenges faced by associations related to donor practices

INSUFFICIENT INVOLVEMENT OF CSOS IN DECISION-MAKING

19% of program staff are consulted prior to calls for proposals, compared to **42%** after calls for proposals with the majority of donors.

32% of program staff who were consulted on calls for proposals report that their feedback was taken into account by the majority of donors.

48% of program staff consider themselves treated as mere implementers by the majority of donors, while only **11%** report having a fluid relationship with them.

73% of data management staff indicate that donor monitoring and evaluation teams are primarily responsible for project monitoring and evaluation.

More than **half** of data staff are not meaningfully involved in monitoring and evaluation planning and implementation, and **46%** state that they are unable to discuss or negotiate the monitoring and evaluation vision and plans.

43% of program staff report that donors are the actors with the greatest influence over activity choices and objectives; only **34%** feel able to influence these with a minority of their donors.

In order to recognize and value CSO expertise in the design and implementation of projects, and thereby respond to their expectations, needs, field realities, and beneficiaries' priorities, donors are encouraged to:

ENSURE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF PROJECTS WITH CSOS, FROM DESIGN TO FINAL EVALUATION, INCLUDING IMPLEMENTATION:

- Fully involve CSOs and national and local authorities in identifying priority issues and challenges within territories, so that calls for proposals reflect field realities, respond to specific population needs, and align with national and regional strategic plans.
- Establish prior dialogue with CSOs to define calls for proposals and eligibility criteria adapted to local actors' realities and capacities, ensuring greater project relevance and effectiveness.
- Encourage the establishment of steering committees bringing together all stakeholders of funded projects, and involve the donor when appropriate, in order to strengthen coordination and shared responsibility in project governance.
- Grant CSOs flexibility in implementation modalities to better adapt interventions to field realities.
- Document and analyze adjustments and good practices developed with CSOs in order to integrate these lessons into future project design and implementation.

ADAPT PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION MODALITIES TO THE EVOLVING CONTEXT OF COUNTRIES OR REGIONS:

- Establish participatory mid-year reviews to adjust projects based on field needs and feedback.
- Systematically include revision or adjustment clauses in cases of force majeure to ensure continuity of activities and protect CSO funding in case of unforeseen events.
- Define and implement specific support measures to assist CSOs in critical or unforeseen contexts.

GUARANTEE CSO OWNERSHIP AND USE OF DATA:

- Recognize CSO ownership of data collected within funding agreements to ensure their right to use and share it.
- Provide technical support to strengthen internal data management systems, including funding for appropriate equipment and software, as well as capacity-building for dedicated staff.
- Encourage and technically support CSOs in analyzing and valorizing the data they produce, enabling them to use it in defining, implementing, and promoting their strategies and priorities.

ADAPT MONITORING AND EVALUATION SYSTEMS TO LOCAL REALITIES, TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE CAPACITIES, CONSTRAINTS, AND SPECIFIC CONTEXT OF THE CSOS:

- Provide technical support for internal operational assessments of CSO monitoring and evaluation practices to define capacity-building plans at individual, collective, and organizational levels.
- Support the digitalization of data collection and management tools, including equipment, software, training, and staff accompaniment, to strengthen the efficiency and reliability of monitoring systems.
- Encourage and provide technical support to CSOs in monitoring and evaluation, covering programmatic, technical, and/or financial aspects, while tailoring it to their specific needs.

(2) ESTABLISH APPROPRIATE FINANCIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGEMENT PROCEDURES

Discussions held with civil society organizations (CSO) as part of the study on challenges faced by associations related to donor practices highlight persistent constraints in financial and administrative management, due to mechanisms insufficiently adapted to field realities. Disbursement delays, rigid budget lines, and limited flexibility for reprogramming activities

or adjusting timelines restrict CSOs' ability to plan, adapt actions, and secure implementation. This is compounded by burdensome administrative and audit procedures, as well as management tools that are often poorly adapted, generating excessive workload, diverting teams from operational priorities, and complicating compliance with donor requirements.

«We often feel we have no choice but to accept constraints because we need the funding in the current context».

Study on challenges faced by associations related to donor practices

INADEQUATE FINANCIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE MECHANISMS

72% of program staff report changes in donor funding priorities, half of whom were not consulted beforehand.

32% of management and finance staff report a mismatch between their preferred financial management tools and methods and those required by donors. This results in increased workload (86%), greater pressure on CSOs (71%), and a form of mistrust in implementing donor requirements (52%).

53% of leadership and finance positions consider indirect funding (allocated through an intermediary) to be inadequate for their needs, and 59% report the same difficulty regarding the use of single bank accounts, which directly penalizes their activities by causing delays in fund disbursement by donors.

41% of leadership and finance positions consider fund acquisition procedures to be complex.

39% of leadership and finance positions indicate that they have no autonomy in managing their funds with the majority of donors, and 11% state that they are not able to communicate the difficulties encountered in this management.

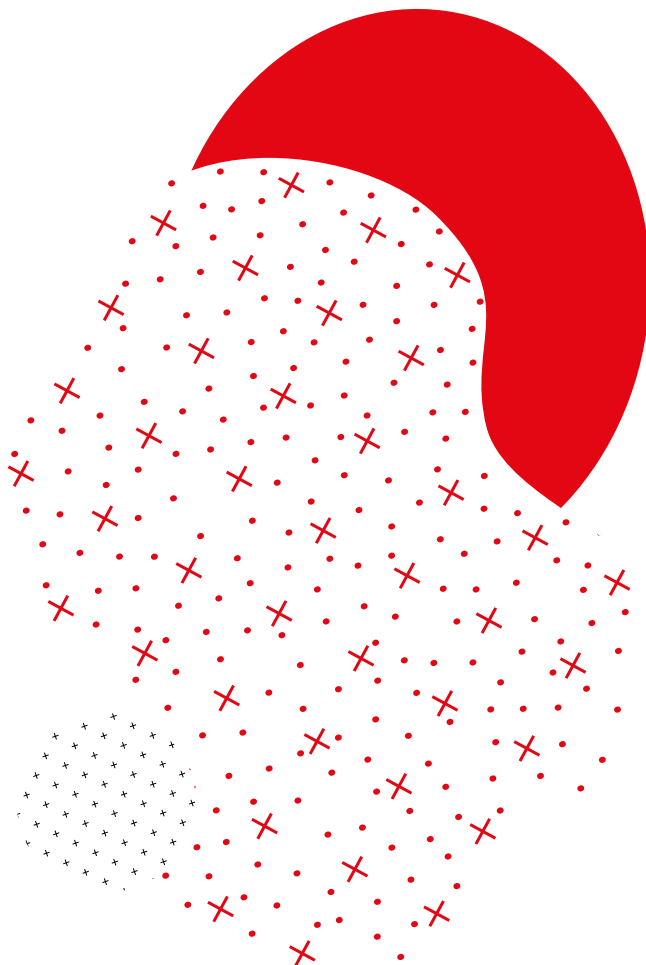
In order to establish financial and administrative management modalities that balance rigor, flexibility, and sustainability, while taking into account the capacities and operational contexts of civil society organizations, donors are encouraged to:

GUARANTEE CSO CAPACITY FOR ACTION AND DECISION-MAKING IN ADMINISTRATIVE AND FINANCIAL PROCESSES:

- Provide technical assistance to CSOs in the development and updating of their strategic documents (institutional strategy, action plans, internal procedures, etc.), in order to strengthen their governance and management capacity.
- Respect CSO internal procedures to preserve their operation, compliance, and service continuity.
- Share funding agreements in a timely manner to allow CSOs to fully review commitments, provide feedback, and clarify modalities before signature.
- Co-develop and jointly monitor a CSO-donor risk management plan in order to anticipate administrative, financial, and operational risks and strengthen the capacity to respond in case of difficulties.

ENSURE COVERAGE OF THE ACTUAL OPERATING COSTS OF CSOS:

- Grant each project administrative and management fees of at least 7% of the total budget, while allowing CSOs flexibility in how these fees are managed.
- Allow flexible budget allocation across different expenditure lines (activities, human resources, operating costs, etc.) in order to reflect local realities and constraints.
- Take into account and fund the essential fixed costs required for CSOs to operate (rent, electricity, water, internet, maintenance, etc.) in order to ensure continuity of activities and organizational stability.
- Authorize a cost-sharing system for operating expenses, including staff salaries and logistical purchases (furniture and equipment for donor-related setup, transport, primary supplies), so that these costs can be proportionally co-funded among donors.
- Take into account changes in costs and charges (social contributions and taxes) in multi-year projects.
- Consider unforeseen circumstances linked to exchange rate fluctuations and exceptional inflation increases (particularly in times of crisis such as COVID-19) by incorporating budget flexibility or adjustment mechanisms into projects, in order to protect CSO funding and maintain their operational capacity.
- Allow adjustments during project implementation to the donor's contribution to operating costs in cases of crisis or unexpected withdrawal of another donor.
- Include an "emergency fund" line in each funded project, which may be used for operating costs and to finance additional unplanned activities when these funds have not been fully mobilized during the project.
- Allow depreciation of equipment acquired for projects, with the possibility of transferring ownership of assets to the CSOs involved in implementation once the project is completed.



SIMPLIFY, HARMONIZE, AND ADAPT FINANCIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGEMENT TOOLS AND PROCEDURES, TAKING INTO ACCOUNT LOCAL REALITIES AS WELL AS THE CAPACITIES AND CONSTRAINTS OF CSOS:

- Adapt supporting documentation requirements for expenditures to field realities, in order to facilitate project implementation without compromising financial oversight.
- Respect funding and disbursement timelines to avoid cash flow tensions and delays in project implementation.
- Promote and develop multi-year and flexible funding, enabling CSOs to plan their actions over the long term and adjust them as needed.
- Allow disbursements to be spread over longer periods, in order to reduce administrative burden and limit the need for CSOs to advance funds from their own cash flow.
- Authorize flexibility in the use of contingency budget lines, so that funds can be quickly reallocated according to actual project needs without requiring formal approval for each minor adjustment.
- Simplify procedures for accessing and using emergency funds, enabling CSOs to respond rapidly and effectively to crisis situations.
- Co-develop the financial framework, monitoring tools, and budget with CSOs, while providing dedicated support, in order to strengthen the quality of financial monitoring and project planning capacity

For banking procedures:

- Create a specific budget line for bank fees in order to protect the operational budget.
- Shorten disbursement timelines to ensure timely availability of funds for planned activities.
- Review the disbursement process in cases of consortia or multiple recipients (for example, under Global Fund arrangements) to simplify transfers and avoid delays.
- Systematically convert transfers into local currency to prevent losses due to exchange rate fluctuations.
- Simplify disbursement procedures in order to reduce delays and better anticipate unforeseen budgetary issues.

For audits:

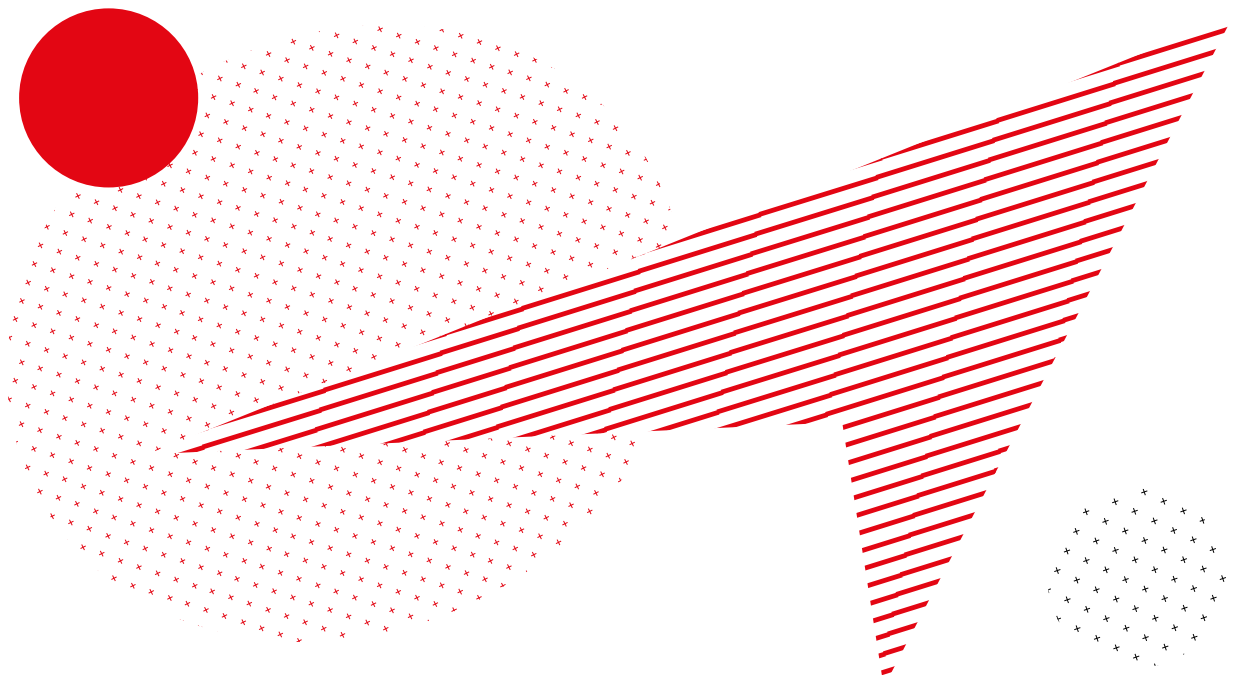
- Simplify and adapt audit requirements, taking into account the size and capacities of CSOs, as well as the indirect costs associated with audits.
- Ensure funding for CSO account certification when required by the donor.
- Finance an internal auditor to strengthen CSOs' accounting capacities and effectively prepare for external audits.
- Fully involve CSOs in developing the terms of reference (ToR) for external audits to ensure their relevance and feasibility.
- Share the ToR with CSOs at least two months prior to the audit to allow adequate preparation.
- Set and recall audit dates in the agreement and/or the project activity timeline to facilitate organization and ensure CSO availability.

(3) ENSURE SUPPORTIVE AND CONTEXT-RELEVANT WORKING CONDITIONS

Feedback from civil society organizations (CSOs), collected as part of the study on challenges faced by associations related to donor practices, highlights unfavorable working conditions, often described as unsatisfactory, which hinder organizational effectiveness and threaten the sustainability of their actions. Workloads are heavy and often unevenly distributed, material resources are insufficient and inappropriate, and key functions (such as logistics or administration) are not included in the majority of CSO funding. This is compounded by difficulties in covering fixed

costs and the lack of support in preparing required strategic documents, which leads some CSOs to be excluded from multiple calls for proposals. In terms of human resources, variations in salary rules from one donor to another — some even intervening directly in salary setting — create inequalities and tensions within teams. The lack of suitable training, high staff turnover linked to precarious funding, and the absence of attention to staff mental health further exacerbate organizational vulnerabilities.

*«Donors are interested in the data;
the associative life doesn't matter to them
for the progress of the project,
they are focused on the indicators».*



IMPACT OF DONOR REQUIREMENTS ON ACTIVITIES AND STAFF

Donors' requests and requirements have an impact on activity implementation.

For program staff:

72% report that inappropriate accountability requirements reduce their organizational performance, and **74%** feel limited in their capacity to act.

68% report a significant increase in workload directly linked to a lack of resources to meet donors' demands.

30% have neither the time nor the flexibility needed to cope with these demands, and **14%** lack sufficient skills or technical resources, preventing them from responding effectively.

For monitoring and evaluation positions:

81% frequently have to adjust the time spent on monitoring and evaluation to meet donors' expectations, and **76%** must adapt their strategies and data collection tools due to insufficient technical resources.

57% report a decline in data quality, **53%** a decrease in result accuracy.

57% lack the necessary capacities (human, technical, financial, time) to carry out monitoring and evaluation activities (planning, data collection, analysis, and management).

More than **70%** use their own monitoring and evaluation tools, and **96%** have developed these tools themselves. These positions are mostly funded through donor projects, and staff departures at the end of funding often result in the loss of these skills and tools, leaving CSOs without human, technical, and material resources to ensure sustainable monitoring and evaluation.

Nearly **80%** report feeling pressure from donors, particularly regarding targets to be met (78%), reporting deadlines (71%), and the choice of indicators (50%). This pressure results in a genuine "race to meet targets" (such as quotas of people to be tested), with negative feedback when these targets are not achieved.

Donors' requests and requirements affect working conditions.

For medical and psycho-social staff:

71% report unsatisfactory or poor working conditions.

89% indicate that adequate remuneration would improve their working conditions. Access to training is a significant need: **70%** wish to benefit from it. **81%** experience salary variations depending on the donor: **45%** for bonuses, allowances, and benefits (travel, housing, etc.).

58% report that their salary changes depending on the donor or project.

23% receive a bonus for performing certain medical or psychosocial services (e.g., proctology).

74% indicate that changes in funding affect their working conditions, particularly their psychological state (stress, motivation, burnout) and salary.

For data management staff:

67% indicate that donor requests or actions affect their well-being at work.

To ensure favorable working conditions and access to the technical, human, and financial resources necessary and appropriate for project implementation, donors are encouraged to:

ENSURE THAT CSOS HAVE MATERIAL, ORGANIZATIONAL, AND LOGISTICAL RESOURCES ADAPTED TO THEIR OPERATIONAL CONTEXT, INCLUDING LOCAL CONSTRAINTS AND PROJECT-RELATED REQUIREMENTS:

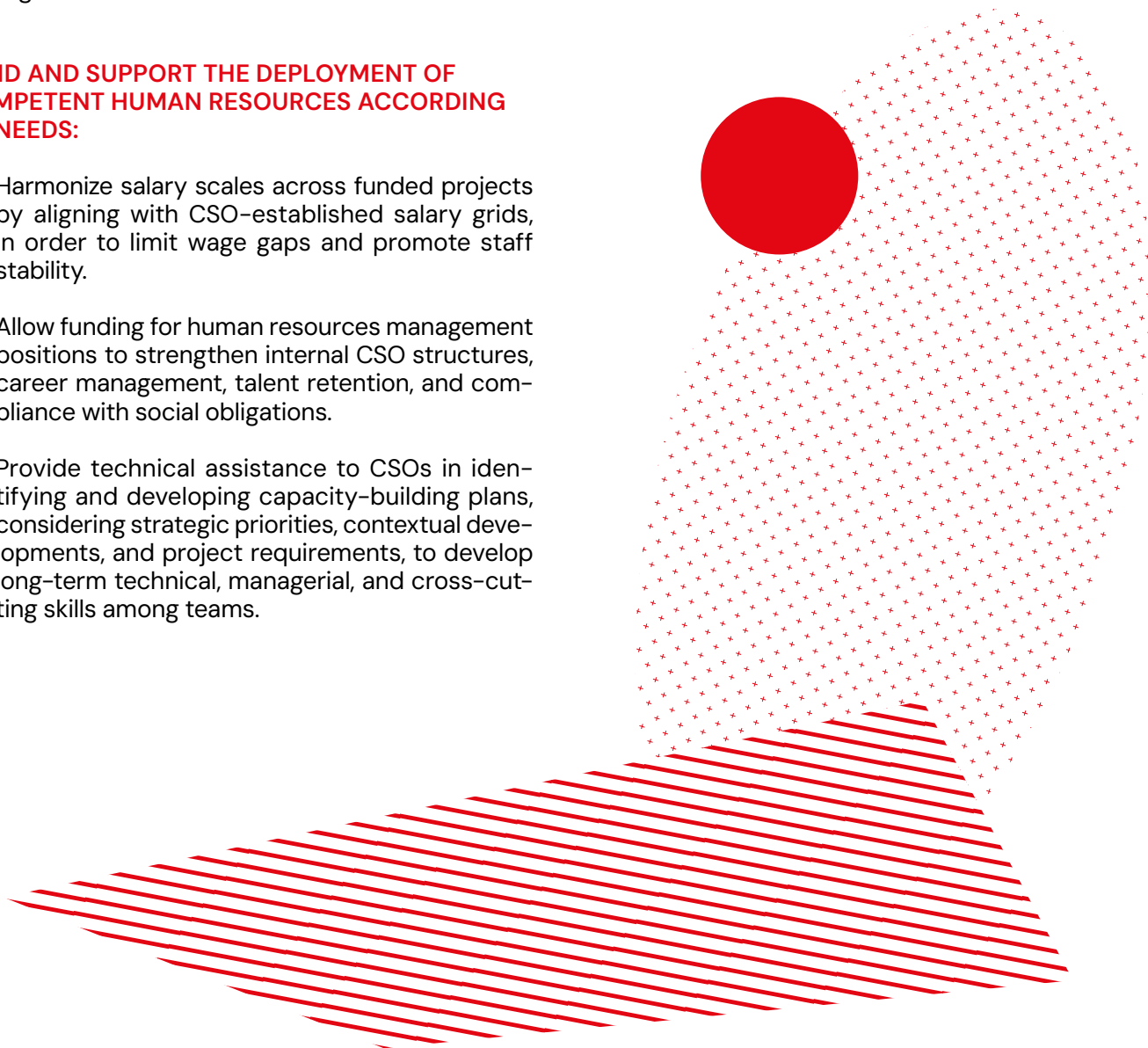
- Fund the human and organizational resources necessary and sufficient for project implementation to ensure balanced workloads, alignment between positions and responsibilities, and to prevent team burnout.
- Fund and provide technical assistance to CSOs for implementing security plans adapted to field realities, to protect teams, beneficiaries, and organizational assets.

FUND AND SUPPORT THE DEPLOYMENT OF COMPETENT HUMAN RESOURCES ACCORDING TO NEEDS:

- Harmonize salary scales across funded projects by aligning with CSO-established salary grids, in order to limit wage gaps and promote staff stability.
- Allow funding for human resources management positions to strengthen internal CSO structures, career management, talent retention, and compliance with social obligations.
- Provide technical assistance to CSOs in identifying and developing capacity-building plans, considering strategic priorities, contextual developments, and project requirements, to develop long-term technical, managerial, and cross-cutting skills among teams.

PROMOTE THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF CSO STAFF:

- Encourage and fund the establishment of staff support and exchange spaces, such as peer discussion groups, collective debriefing sessions, and recreational and well-being activities, in order to foster team cohesion and prevent psychosocial risks.
- Encourage and fund the implementation of supervision and psychological support mechanisms, including dedicated technical assistance for mental health (confidential helplines, team-building workshops, sports activities, interventions by psychologists or external professionals, etc.), adapted to the operational context and staff levels of exposure to stress.



(4) SECURE HORIZONTAL, OPEN AND ONGOING COMMUNICATION

A major challenge reported by civil society organizations (CSO) in the study on challenges faced by associations related to donor practices is the communication with donors. Information is often missing, lately delivered, or difficult to access, and exchanges remain too formal, sporadic, and limited to certain project phases. The lack of a dialogue framework, the absence of identified contact persons on the

donor side, and the inadequacy of tools for local realities complicate collaboration. Furthermore, evaluation practices remain largely one-sided: donors evaluate CSOs, while CSOs rarely have opportunities or guarantees to provide feedback on the quality and relevance of the partnership, which is essential for improvement.

«Often, when donors want to communicate, it's not communication, it's information (...) either you accept it, or you are not allowed to disagree».

Study on challenges faced by associations related to donor practices

DONOR-CSO RELATIONS MARKED BY LACK OF TRUST AND DIALOGUE

For Program staff:

11% have smooth relations with most donors.

58% of interviewees mentioned a lack of trust and an unbalanced relationship with donors.

19% report that their feedbacks and suggestions to improve accountability requirements are not taken into account.

Over half of them consider it impossible to meet accountability requirements due to lack of trust toward donors, and **63%** believe donors do not trust them. This absence of reciprocal trust prevents equal partnerships and undermines collaboration. The main solutions proposed by program staff to improve accountability practices are communication (30%) and listening, support, and trust (30%).

For Finance staff:

32% report mismatches between their financial management tools and methods and those required by donors, particularly regarding audits, reporting, or expenditure policies. These mismatches increase workload, pressure, and mistrust in fulfilling donor requests. CSOs emphasize the need for enhanced support from donors to address this.

To ensure horizontal, transparent, and continuous communication and to establish balanced partnerships based on trust, respect, listening, and shared accountability throughout the collaboration, donors are encouraged to:

BEFORE THE FUNDING CYCLE:

- Widely and early disseminate information on calls for proposals, with sufficient notice, using communication channels adapted to local contexts, and provide practical tools (submission guides, contact persons on application platforms) to facilitate CSO understanding of strategies, eligibility criteria, timelines, and funding modalities.
- Establish spaces for exchange throughout the process — from call for proposal publication to grant decision — offering adapted support: collective information sessions, dedicated contact channels, and support in using tools and procedures.
- Provide systematic feedback to project proponents — from acknowledgment of receipt to final decision — including explanations in case of rejection.
- Systematically inform CSOs of donor country offices and facilitate connections and exchanges with them to strengthen local dialogue.
- For selected CSO projects, provide support in co-constructing and finalizing the project, involving the donor focal point from this phase to clarify expectations, adjust modalities, and secure project start-up.

DURING THE FUNDING CYCLE:

- Ensure regular and quality project follow-up, designate an accessible focal point, establish a periodic exchange framework (technical and financial), and provide clear, consistent, and responsive feedback to CSO requests.
- Strengthen donor-CSO links through regular follow-up visits with project focal points, facilitating interactions with local offices to better understand operational realities and contextual constraints.
- Adapt communication methods to local contexts by diversifying channels, formats, and languages to ensure accessibility, mutual understanding, and efficiency throughout the project.
- Conduct evaluations jointly with CSOs, involving implementation teams at all stages of the evaluation process and integrating their feedback and analysis into conclusions and recommendations.
- Transparently and proactively inform CSOs of any changes in donor strategy, priorities, or intervention modalities, enabling them to anticipate impacts and adjust ongoing projects accordingly.

AFTER THE FUNDING CYCLE:

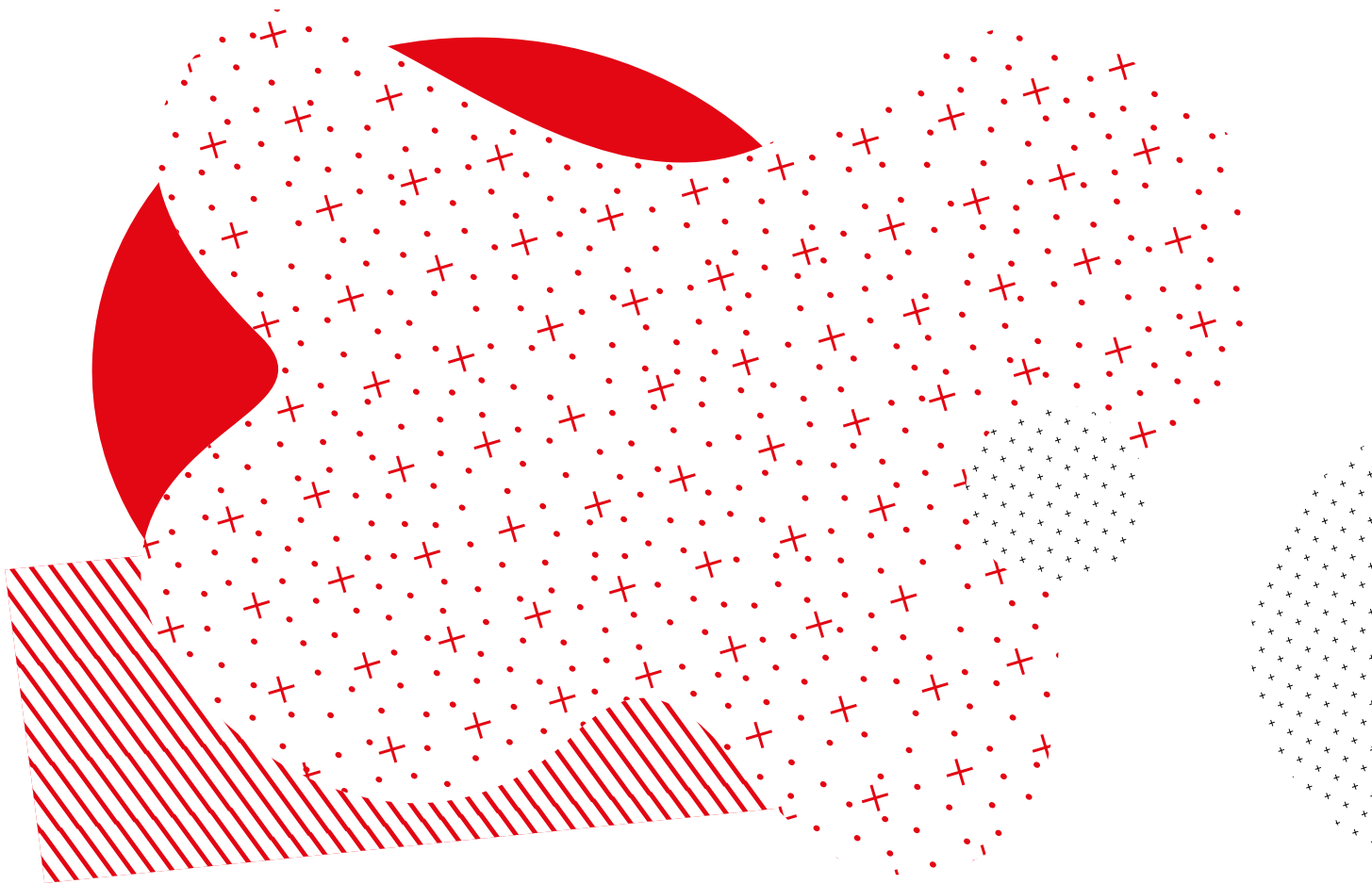
- Capitalize on and publicize best practices and results of completed projects, involving CSOs in analyzing lessons learned and ensuring dissemination to relevant actors locally, nationally, and internationally.
- Establish lasting exchange frameworks between donors and CSOs, promoting South-South and North-North exchanges to strengthen cross-learning, share feedback, and consolidate long-term strategic partnerships.
- Enable CSOs to evaluate donor practices through formalized and secure mechanisms, focusing on the relevance and alignment of interventions with local priorities, collaboration quality and limits, inclusion of local CSOs in project design and implementation, and the sustainable results and impact of projects on communities.

(5) ANTICIPATING FUNDING SHIFTS AND WITHDRAWALS

As highlighted by civil society organizations (CSO) during recent discussions, donor withdrawal, whether sudden or anticipated, can have particularly severe consequences for organizations: abrupt cessation of activities, staff layoffs, loss of resources, disruption of connections with beneficiaries, and sometimes closure of structures. When there is no defined framework

and joint preparation in advance, CSOs find themselves in a critical situation directly threatening their operations and sustainability. This underscores the need for collective reflection on ways to anticipate and manage donor disengagement from the start of the partnership, to limit harmful effects and ensure continuity of activities.

«It's often a risk that donors suspend funding overnight, without considering ongoing contracts».



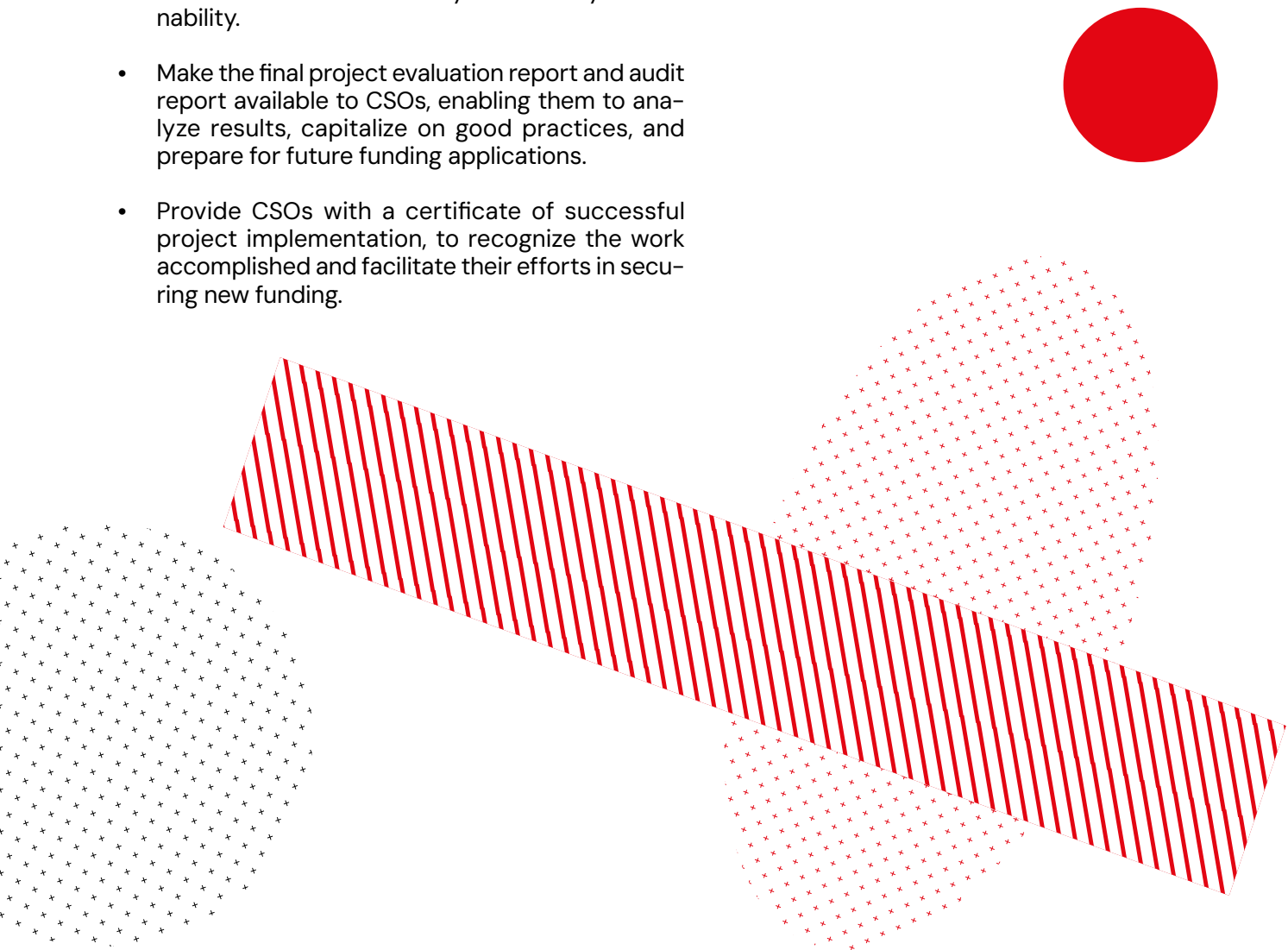
To anticipate changes and funding withdrawals, while supporting transition strategies aimed at preserving continuity of activities and organizational sustainability, donors are encouraged to:

IN CASE OF ANTICIPATED WITHDRAWAL:

- Define withdrawal modalities and framework in consultation with CSOs during project negotiation, to anticipate disengagement conditions.
- Include contractual phase-out clauses, allowing gradual disengagement and giving CSOs time to adapt and plan for continuity.
- Fund and provide technical support to CSOs to develop a financial sustainability plan, ensuring continuity and strengthening organizational resilience.
- Fund and provide technical support for CSOs to develop and implement resource mobilization strategies or complementary funding plans to enhance financial autonomy and activity sustainability.
- Make the final project evaluation report and audit report available to CSOs, enabling them to analyze results, capitalize on good practices, and prepare for future funding applications.
- Provide CSOs with a certificate of successful project implementation, to recognize the work accomplished and facilitate their efforts in securing new funding.

IN CASE OF ABRUPT WITHDRAWAL BY DONOR DECISION:

- Include a period for reassessing CSO capacities when withdrawal is due to non-compliance, allowing negotiation, identification of gaps, and corrective measures before final termination.
- Include contractual provisions for potential abrupt withdrawal, including a minimum 3-months notice, coverage of fixed costs and salaries during transition, coordinated budget adjustments with the CSO, unconditional return of project-acquired equipment, coverage of legal fees, contractual penalties for early termination, and an official letter explaining the withdrawal.
- Include a clause holding the donor legally responsible for social consequences of withdrawal, particularly in cases of CSO staff layoffs.



TOWARDS STRONGER CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS: CSOS' RECOMMENDATIONS TO THEMSELVES

From a perspective of shared responsibility, civil society organizations have identified areas for improvement that are directly applicable to their own practices. These recommendations reflect the CSOs' commitment to strengthening their professionalism, internal coordination, and resilience in the light of structural and operational challenges.

ENSURE CSOS HAVE THE MATERIAL, ORGANIZATIONAL, AND LOGISTICAL RESOURCES ADAPTED TO PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION:

- Conduct regular analyses of the organizational work system to identify dysfunctions, overloads, task duplication, and needs for material, human, and logistical resources.
- Develop and implement an organizational action plan that includes task allocation and balancing, activity prioritization, adaptation of work methods, and, when relevant, use of internships, work-study programs, or other forms of temporary support.
- Develop, formalize, and update a security plan adapted to the intervention context, including risk prevention, protection of teams and beneficiaries, and crisis management procedures.
- Prepare and update strategic documents (institutional strategy, operational plans, internal procedures) tailored to the organization's maturity level and capacities, to strengthen governance and project management.
- For each project, include discussions with the donor on human resources to anticipate needs, ensure alignment between project objectives and team capacities, and negotiate appropriate staffing.

PRIORITIZE TRANSPARENT AND CONTINUOUS INTERNAL COMMUNICATION:

- Ensure regular and systematic sharing of project information among teams to facilitate coordination, guarantee consistency of actions, and keep the donor accurately and fully informed.
- Ensure project visibility and recognition after closure, complementing donor capitalization activities, by disseminating results, best practices, and impacts to internal and external stakeholders.

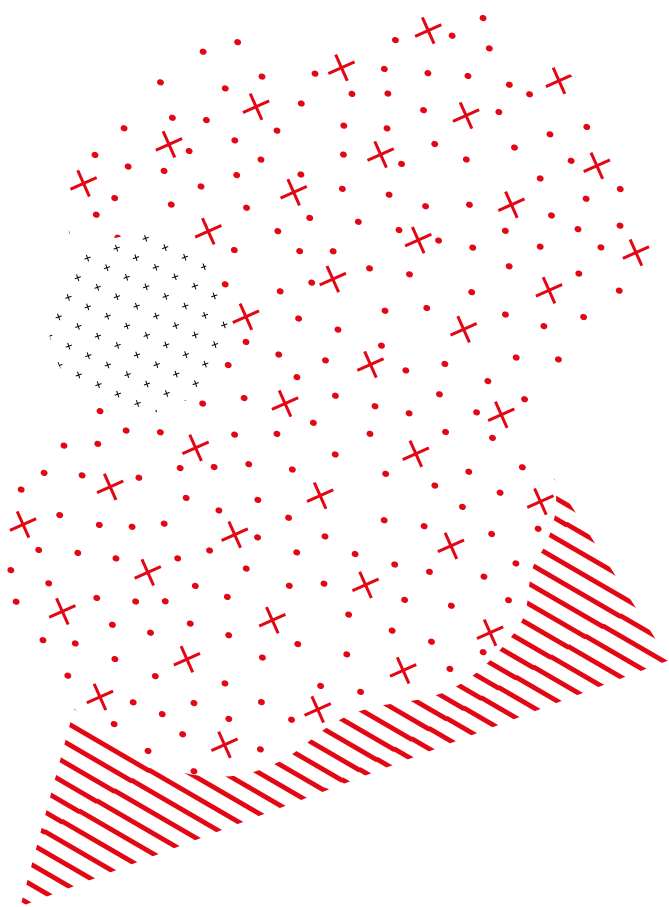
« The mistake we made was placing many people 100% on these projects, and now the cut came abruptly ».

ANTICIPATE FUNDING CHANGES AND WITHDRAWALS IN CASE OF PLANNED WITHDRAWAL:

- Communicate the withdrawal at least one year in advance, informing all relevant parties (staff, beneficiaries, partners, government, donors, etc.) and highlighting the association's work to maintain credibility and legitimacy with all stakeholders.
- Establish staff-led discussion groups to share the impacts of the withdrawal and identify financial, material, or logistical support measures to mitigate its effects.
- Develop a continuity strategy immediately upon withdrawal announcement, including strengthening investment and resource mobilization activities, to secure the financing and means needed to continue operations.
- Develop and implement a beneficiary referral plan to ensure service continuity and facilitate handover of cases to partners or structures taking over activities.
- Advocate for government uptake of HIV/AIDS activities to ensure service sustainability for target populations.

IN CASE OF SUDDEN WITHDRAWAL BY DONOR DECISION:

- Communicate rapidly and continuously for at least three months, informing all relevant parties (staff, beneficiaries, partners, government, donors, etc.) of the consequences of funding cessation via networks, media, or appropriate platforms.
- Inform communities and opinion leaders to solicit financial contributions, material support, or logistical assistance from members and beneficiaries.
- Identify and reduce non-essential costs by prioritizing expenditures and postponing or canceling non-critical activities to free up resources.
- Review project budgets and strategies, prioritizing essential activities and services and identifying those already covered by other donors or CSOs.
- Map available referral points to guide beneficiaries to other structures and ensure service continuity.
- Involve national and local authorities as much as possible to mitigate the immediate consequences of donor withdrawal and secure continuity of interventions.
- Negotiate budget adjustments or emergency funds with other donors to secure financing for essential activities and limit the impact of abrupt withdrawal on beneficiaries and staff.
- Develop and implement strategies for mobilizing internal resources to cushion the financial shock and maintain essential activities.
- Create a financial reserve sufficient to cover fixed costs for at least three months, including rent, salaries, utilities, and other essential operational expenses, to ensure minimal continuity in the event of abrupt donor withdrawal.
- Include clauses in staff contracts anticipating sudden funding cessation, clarifying the rights and obligations of donors and CSOs in such events.
- Develop and implement a workforce management plan, including redundancy measures if necessary, use of volunteers, and recruitment of interns to maintain operations.
- Provide psychological support and regular exchange frameworks to support staff well-being and facilitate internal communication during crisis situations.



CONCLUSION

This document aims to strengthen the quality of partnerships between funders and civil society organizations (CSOs), so that actions implemented on the ground are more sustainable, effective, and truly responsive to the needs of the populations. The findings of the study and the recommendations provided highlight how funding modalities—and above all the CSO–donor relationship—directly shape CSOs’ capacity to fulfill their missions and innovate in response to health and social challenges.

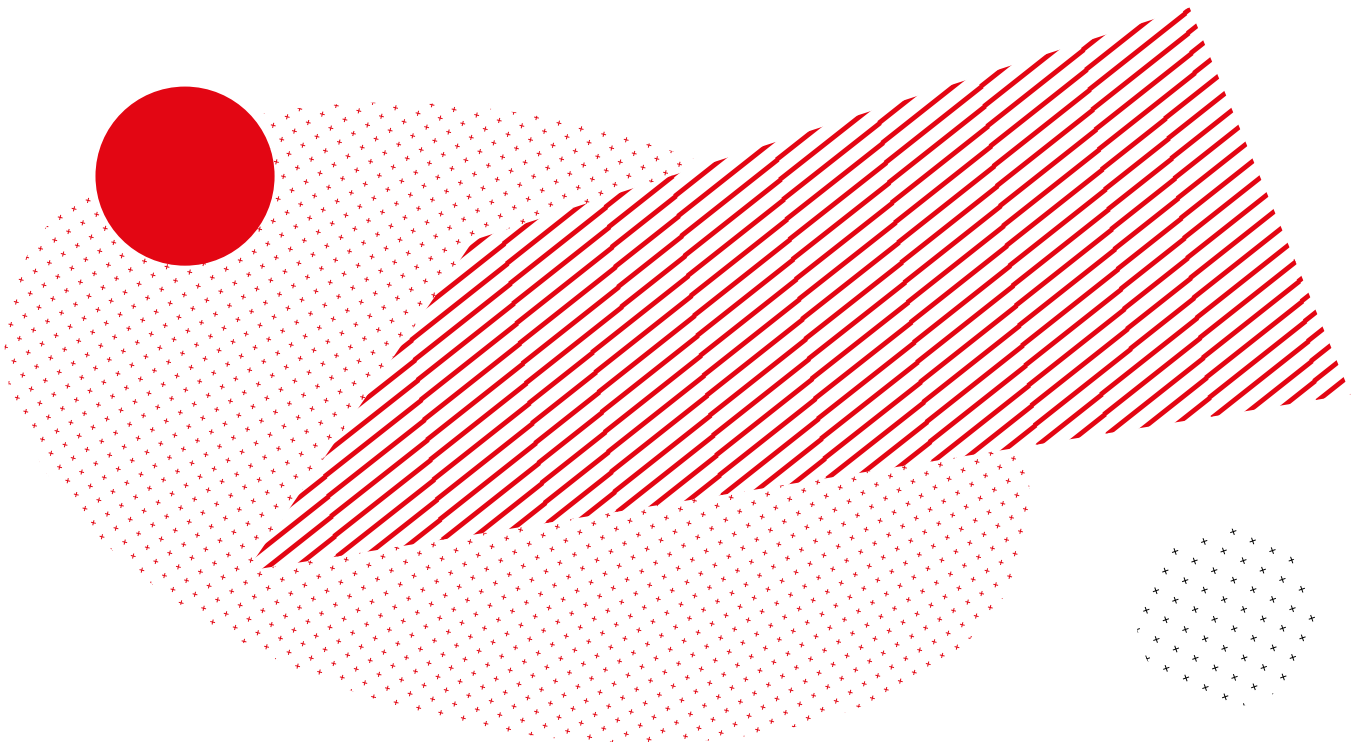
These recommendations are intended as a tool for dialogue and continuous improvement: they can be adopted and adapted by CSOs themselves, but also

by donors, who will find concrete guidance to evolve their practices and enhance the relevance, impact, and sustainability of their partnerships.

We therefore invite all donors and CSOs to join this collective effort, draw inspiration from the proposed approaches, and collectively engage in a dynamic of co-responsibility, trust, and adaptation to the realities on the ground. By combining these efforts, partnerships can truly support sustainable, effective, and equitable actions for the most vulnerable populations.

GLOSSARY

CSO:	Civil Society organizations
HIV:	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
PEPFAR:	President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief
USAID:	United States Agency for International Development
WCA:	West and Central Africa



TOOL: GUIDELINES FOR FAIR FUNDING NEGOTIATION

BEFORE SIGNING THE FUNDING CONTRACT

DESIGN AND CO-CONSTRUCTION

- Effective involvement of the CSO in identifying priorities and designing the project
- Co-development of objectives, indicators, and monitoring tools
- Co-development of the financial framework and budgetary tools
- Prior dialogue on eligibility criteria and implementation modalities
- Steering committee including all project stakeholders
- Contractual recognition of ownership of data produced by the CSO
- Clause for revision or adjustment in case of force majeure included in the agreement

FINANCIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE MODALITIES

- Administrative and management fees of at least 7% of the budget
- Coverage of structural fixed costs
- Authorization for a share of operating costs
- Possibility of flexible allocation between budget lines
- Transmission of agreements in timeframes allowing appropriation and negotiation
- Contractual provision defining the modalities for early withdrawal

DURING PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

OPERATIONAL ADAPTATION AND FLEXIBILITY

- Participatory semi-annual reviews allowing project adjustments
- Simplified and flexible budget reallocation
- Flexibility in using the contingency line
- Simplification of procedures for accessing emergency funds
- Technical support for strengthening internal data management systems
- Technical support for organizational strengthening
(*internal procedures, financial management, governance*)
- Technical support for strengthening the monitoring and evaluation system

FINANCIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGEMENT

- Compliance with funding timelines and fund disbursement
- Systematic conversion of transfers into local currency
- Financing of bank fees on a dedicated line
- Staggered and multi-year disbursements whenever possible
- Audit requirements proportional to the size of the project
- Sharing audit terms of reference at least two months before the mission
- CSO involvement in developing the audit terms of reference
- Financing of an internal auditor

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WORKING CONDITIONS AND HUMAN RESOURCES

- Funding of adequate human resources, including human resources management positions
- Alignment of project salary scales with those established by the CSO
- Prevention of staff overload and burnout
- Development of capacity-building plans aligned with the CSO's strategic priorities, context, and project requirements
- Funding of mental health support systems
- Funding of security plans protecting staff, beneficiaries, and assets

COMMUNICATION AND PARTNERSHIP

- Designation of an accessible focal point in the donor's team
- Regular exchange framework
- Organization of field monitoring visits
- Communication adapted to local languages and contexts
- Early information on any strategic changes from the donor

AT THE END OF FUNDING OR IN CASE OF DONOR WITHDRAWAL

MECHANISMS FOR MANAGING DONOR WITHDRAWAL

- Gradual exit clause included in the agreement
- Minimum notice period of 3 months
- Coordinated budget reallocation in case of disengagement
- Payment of fixed costs and salaries during the transition period
- Capacity reassessment period before final termination
- Unconditional return of acquired equipment
- Transmission of final audit and evaluation reports
- Issuance of a certificate of successful project implementation

SUSTAINABILITY AND CAPITALIZATION

- Support in developing a financial sustainability plan
- Support in strategies for mobilizing additional resources
- Joint capitalization of best practices and dissemination of results
- Mechanism allowing the CSO to evaluate collaboration with the donor

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This document is the result of a collective effort. We extend our sincere thanks to the African partner organizations that participated in the study on challenges faced by associations related to donor practices, as well as to the organizations present at the regional workshop held in Lomé (Togo), whose involvement made the co-creation of these recommendations possible.

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For over 30 years, Sidaction has based its existence on a core principle: bringing together research and civil society. Our mission is to act across all areas of the fight against HIV/AIDS through a comprehensive and cross-cutting expertise on the epidemic.

All net funds raised allow Sidaction to finance both research programs and associations supporting people living with HIV, in France and internationally.

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