

DRC Case Study: Equitable & Strategic Partnerships In Entry and Exit Approaches



Celebrating Children's Day at the Child Inclusive Center run by Rostok (DRC partner in Georgia). Photo Credit: Rostok



Introduction

This case study was produced as part of the Danish Refugee Council's (DRC) Global Civil Society Learning Initiative. The thematic focus is of the learning initiative, including this case study, is anchored in DRC's theory of change for engaging with civil society. The means by which we will contribute to influencing change in civil society capacity, agency, and space is through key intervention areas in which DRC sees as having a value-add in engaging with civil society. These intervention areas are partnering with civil society, capacity development support to civil society, facilitating participation of civil society, and supporting advocacy and policy change by civil society. This particular case study explores the first two areas – **partnering** and **capacity development**. Geographically the case study covers South Caucasus - Abkhazia and Italy. The two geographical contexts were selected to reflect a context where DRC is downscaling and eventually exiting its operation through an increased investment in partnerships with local civil society; and a context where DRC is entering a context through the development of strategic partnerships with existing local civil society organisations.

It is DRC's ambition to have stronger strategic partnership engagement, DRC's definition of a strategic partnership has therefore provided the basis for the case study. The two contexts have been chosen to capture learning on what strategic and equitable partnerships might look like in both entry and exit contexts, and a partnership modality when entering a new context where DRC chooses to have a "light operational presence". While in Italy DRC has fairly recently started its engagement, DRC has been present in Abkhazia for many years and is in the process of scaling down its en-

gagement. The two contexts and DRC's engagement with partners in each context is described further below.

Strategic Partnerships

A central element in DRC's definition of strategic partnership is that the cooperation has longer-term objectives beyond single project delivery. It includes 1) DRC engagement in supporting the partner's sustainability, capacity for impact, access to networks and spaces for influencing or advocacy, 2) is based on DRC's partnership principles (equality, transparency, complementarity, results orientation, responsibility) and 3) includes practices such as joint assessment of capacity needs, joint project development, and annual partnership reviews. In strategic partnerships DRC also works to address agency and space, emphasises the legitimacy of partner organisations, and prioritises partnerships with organisations that are representatives of rights holders affected by conflict or displacement.

The methodology of the study included document review, supplemented with an adapted outcome harvesting process, as well as semi structured interviews with DRC staff and their local partners. The focus was to understand perceived achievements, best practices, and drivers or barriers to reach partnership and capacity development results. A number of external stakeholders were also consulted to deepen the understanding of the context and qualify the findings from DRC and partners. The methodology and findings that make up this case study was led by an external consultant.

Abkhazia Context

Abkhazia, a former autonomous Republic of the USSR within the internationally recognized borders of Georgia, is known as a protracted conflict that dates back to the early 1990s. This led a unilateral declaration of independence by Abkhazia supported by the Russian Federation and to a massive displacement of population to Georgia Tbilisi-administered territories and third countries. The population in Abkhazia is challenged by widespread poverty and high levels of unemployment. 60% of the population are self-employed in agriculture. A handful of Georgian speaking people still living in Eastern Abkhazia have been specifically challenged as the Abkhazian authorities in charge over time have limited their civil rights and their access to social services in a heavily politicized context. Abkhazia also hosts a number of people in a refugee-like situation, i.e. from Syria and Ukraine.

International donors and International Non Governmental Organizations (INGOs) have supported internally displaced people and poverty reduction initiatives in Abkhazia for a long time. Declining donor interest has forced many INGOs to gradually down scale their engagement and hand over their activities to local organisations. A number of local civil society actors provide humanitarian support, support in education, dialogue and confidence-building, legal advice, and human rights work. While there are a few strong civil society actors, many of the smaller civil society actors operate on project funding and are active for short periods of time.

Civil society experience a relatively conducive environment for their engagement, there are only few examples of restrictions of media presence and freedom of speech.

DRC has operated in Abkhazia since 2005, initially implementing projects directly but since 2016 has been programming with two local partners - the Foundation Rural Development Association (RDA) and Child Centre Rostok. RDA was established in 2016 as a spin off organisation under a DRC led EU funded project and was registered as an independent association in 2017. RDA originally only focused on providing agricultural equipment through an Equipment Rental Scheme (ERS), but has developed its portfolio to include informal education, youth engagement and social inclusion.

Following the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 an estimated 300 Ukrainian nationals originating from Donbass moved to Abkhazia. The idea to establish Rostok was developed by a group of Ukrainians. The group applied for a small grant under a DRC project supporting small scale local initiatives and with the support of DRC, the group formally registered Rostok as an independent organisation in September 2016.

DRC's strategy for Abkhazia has a five-year horizon for DRC to conclude its engagement in shelter and infrastructure, and to hand over its engagement in economic recovery and education to its local partners. It is DRC's ambition to continue to support its partners to expand their capacity and outreach.

Rosktok Child Development Centre. Photo credit: Rostok



Italy Context

The Italy context is characterised by a protracted mixed-migration crisis. Italy has for decades been attracting significant migration flows, especially unskilled workers for the agricultural sector. With the Arab Spring and resulting conflicts, new flows of migrants and asylum seekers increased, and it became an increasing political topic in Italy as part of the European “migration crisis”. The Piedmont area, where DRC is active, is an important exit-corridor for refugees or migrants attempting to pass through to France and further north.



An informal camp set up by migrants under a flyover in Ventimiglia. Photo credit: Oxfam/Agostino Loffredi

In 2015 France restored border patrols and refugees were pushed back and forced to stay, thereby overflowing the public reception capacity in Italy. The Piedmont area experiences both challenges with gaps in the public reception system, as well as with integration support for asylum seekers once they exit the formal reception system. Italy has a strong civil society that is actively supporting migrants and refugees. Civil society actors collaborate with local authorities and in some cases substitute public services where gaps exist.



R4A volunteers and the mobile clinic. Photo credit: DRC Italy

DRC initiated partnership cooperation in Italy in 2018. Following a scoping process, DRC entered a partnership with Esserci, a local social cooperative engaged in social projects in the Piedmont region. The primary focus of the initial agreement with Esserci was the deployment of a project coordinator to be hosted by Esserci and funded by DRC’s flexible funds. The project coordinator was to support Esserci in their migrant and refugee focused activities, and at the same time map the context, civil society, best practices, and opportunities for fundraising. Since then, DRC has attracted funding from a number of private foundations and currently has a portfolio of five projects covering legal aid, social protection, and health services. The total portfolio size is 430,000 Euro of which 200,000 Euro is managed by partners. DRC has extended its formal partnership to include Rainbow4Africa Medical Development (R4A), a voluntary medical association of “doctors without borders” that has smaller health-focused initiatives in Italy, as well as Diaconia Valdese (DV), a nationwide Waldensian Diaconia that collects and connects social activities across Italy.

Learning: Promising Practices and Recommendations

Entry Strategy

The case study identified DRC's entry in Italy as gradual, with analysis and scoping missions, potential partner identification, validation with strategic stakeholders, staff deployment with a selected partner, and joint project development – all preceding the establishment of a small DRC office in Turin (with a total of five DRC employees).

DRC's entry approach in Italy included a strategic decision to have a light touch presence and build a partnership model that could utilise mutual comparative advantages between DRC and national civil society actors. The gradual entry enabled DRC to **move at the speed of trust** and has been recognised by partners as showing respect for the context and partner's existing engagement. The case study has identified a number of good practices in how DRC designed its entry:

- Diligent scoping and analysis allowed DRC to identify both the geographic area and partners where it would have the strongest comparative and complementary value.¹

- Identifying and engaging with partners where DRC had relevant and complementary capacities, and building on national partner's existing objectives and engagements.
- Building mutual understanding and partnership relations through dialogue, and the deployment of staff within a partner organisation, as part of the partnership establishment phase.
- Developing and formalising a strategic partnership, before engaging in project development and fundraising ensured that initial activities were strategic and not only opportunity driven.

In the context of a non-acute crisis and with an existing strong civil society, DRC's gradual entry and focus on partnering with existing civil society, is recognised by the case study as a strong approach for building a strategic presence. Prioritising to build its engagement with existing civil society also allows DRC the flexibility to both down-scale and increase activities, based on project opportunities or changes in the context situation, and reduces economic and sustainability costs of potential exit.²

Exit Strategy and Sustainability

In a context where donor funding is decreasing and it becomes more difficult to sustain presence, many INGOs engage with local partners to maintain support to affected populations at a lower cost. At the same time, a decrease in donor funding and limited opportunities for local fundraising and income generation impacts the financial sustainability of local civil society actors more so. Local civil society organization's de-

pendency and vulnerability to changes in back donor priorities can be minimised if a diversified funding base is ensured. At the same time, organisational sustainability rests on civil society organisation having a clear identity, being well established in the local context, and having qualified staff and capacity to apply for and implement projects where donor funding is available. These characteristics form the basis for an organisa-

¹ The value of conducting an analysis of the local civils society context is also emphasized in DRC's Global Civil Society Engagement Strategy. <https://www.drc.ngo/our-work/what-we-do/civil-society-engagement-cse/our-work/>

² In Abkhazia, DRC had been implementing projects directly for many years and engaging in partnerships with local civil society actors did not form part of the entry strategy, good practices on entry strategy therefore only refer to Italy.

tion to successfully apply for funding from donors. The process is cyclic in the way that i.e. visibility increases the likelihood of an organisation to be invited to submit proposals to donors, whereas a diversified funding base also increases the organisation's visibility.

The case study identified a number of good practices in the way DRC promotes sustainability and a constructive exit approach:

- DRC's five year exit strategy for Abkhazia allows DRC to support its partners to expand their capacity and outreach. **The five year timeline** provides time for DRC and partners to identify capabilities that will help the partners to become more visible and recognised by the communities they support and back donors.
- DRC has supported partners in Abkhazia to establish income generating activities. A positive outcome of this, beyond financial sustainability, is that the partners focus their attention towards accountability to their constituencies.
- In addition to supporting partners with **diversifying their funding base** in Abkhazia, DRC has provided technical support and quality assurance to partners applying for local grants. This supports the partner's aspiration to successfully implement smaller grant projects and gradually be able to apply for larger projects from donors independently.

- **Consideration to exit has been given from the onset of DRC's engagement** in Italy. A conscious decision was taken to have a relatively light presence which would allow DRC to scale its engagement up or down depending on needs and funding opportunities.

- In Italy, DRC identified existing organisations with which to **build on complementarities and reinforcing local capacities** as an approach to sustainability and responsible exit approach. Similar to Abkhazia, DRC supported the diversification of partner's funding base through co-creation and joint programming and leveraging DRC's position to be able to secure funding outside of Italy.

Considering the risk that local civil society actors cannot maintain their income in a situation where donor funding is being reduced, it is recommended that DRC build on the good practices from Italy and Abkhazia, and ensure that a thorough analysis of the economic opportunities for local civil society actors are investigated, before deciding to transfer the implementation of DRC activities to a local organisation. Similarly, it is suggested that DRC use the experience from Abkhazian and Italy to establish guidance on its entry and exit in contexts in general. This guidance could include that DRC could give further consideration to how DRC's operational structure can best be supported to remain light and flexible.

Strategic Partnerships

A central element in DRC's definition of strategic partnership is the focus on longer-term objectives beyond joint response outputs with partners. There are several examples of this, but only one example of strategic objectives being formalised in an Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). Sub-grant agreements on specific projects are thus the primary formal arrangements governing the partnerships in both Italy and Abkhazia. While the sub-grant agreement clearly states the roles of DRC and the local partner in the project, they have limitations in committing DRC and the local partner beyond the project, towards more strategic partnership engagement. Furthermore, the project based agreements do not include support for sustainability and capacity development beyond the scope of the project. Longer-term engagement being the key element in strategic partnerships, it is important

to define, structure and formalise the relationship and objectives of the partnership extending beyond project delivery.

Of the partnerships reviewed, only the partnership with Esserci was initiated with a partnership MoU, which the case study recommends as a best practice.³ Apart from ensuring clarity of the objective of the partnership (beyond joint response output), several other good practices for partnership development have been identified in DRC's partnerships.

- The case study has shown how **mutual understanding of comparative advantages** is central to both partnership development and capacity; discussed in further detail in the section below.

³ The development of a partnership MoU is also suggested in DRC's Global Civil Society Engagement Strategy. A template of an MoU can be found on Insite, <https://drcngo.sharepoint.com/sites/insite-civilsociety/SitePages/Civil-Society-Learning.aspx>

- Capacity development and **mutual learning** has taken place in all partnerships in Abkhazia and Italy, through staff deployment to partner offices, working side by side with partners, conducting regular structured reflection meetings, funding consultant support, conducting quality technical trainings, and linking partners to expert networks.
- **Agreement on values and principles and how they are applied in practice**, has been important for the development of strategic partnership. DRC's partnership principles are included in the organization's partnership MoU, as well as guidance promoting partner input to principles, so that they are not solely defined by DRC. Dialogue of how

principles are expected to guide the partnership in practice should be part of the process. Examples of how the partnership principles are applied in practice is discussed further in the section below.

- The case study has showed how **ongoing review and reflection** have been an important element in partnership development and learning. Systematic reflection and learning at the operational level complemented by regular strategic reflections including management/leadership of DRC and the partnership organisations has been identified as a good practice.

Partnership Principles in Practice

DRC's partnership principles – equality, transparency, complementarity, results orientation, responsibility⁴ – are recognised by all five partners participating in this case study. Examples of how the individual principles are reflected in the partnerships include:

- Partners experience **equality** by 1) DRC's recognition of partner's own vision and mission, 2) DRC and partners taking joint decisions and DRC not having predetermined solutions, 3) joint development of projects that recognises the relevance of different perspectives and complementary capacities of DRC and partners.
- Partners experience **transparency** by 1) DRC being open and informative about plans and objectives, 2) being open for critical dialogue, 3) timely sharing of information and challenges or opportunities relevant for partners, 4) openness about budgets.
- The case study finds that partnerships are **complementary** (see dedicated complementarity section below for further details).
- The partnerships are found to be **results-oriented** in 1) focusing on delivering project results and providing concrete services to affected people, 2) being flexible and adapting to the context on the ground, and 3) utilising partners comparative advantages.

- The partnerships are found to be **responsible** in the way that both DRC and all local partners commit to activities only when they have value add and capacity to deliver on their commitments, as also reflected by the partnerships being transparent and built on trust.

An important feature identified by partners in the cooperation with DRC has been trust, which has been built by proximity, close and informal dialogue, a sense of openness, humbleness and honesty, experiencing DRC as flexible and context driven, not “rushing in”, and showing interest in understanding the partner's organisation and operation. Trust is an essential element of effective collaboration, being able to see opportunities, take risks together, and respond to changes. It is thus a relevant and important feature of the partnerships reviewed in this case study.

The experience of partnership principles has primarily been based on personal relations and attitudes, rather than formalised agreements, scheduled reflections on how the principles should guide partnership in practice, or regular review of the partnerships informed by the principles. While personal relations and culture is important in establishing partnership relations, they are also vulnerable to changes in these relations. It is recommended that DRC formalises partnership principles, dialogue of how they are applied, as well as when and how they are reviewed as part of the process of developing partnership MoUs.

⁴ DRC partnership principles are based on the principles endorsed by the Global Humanitarian Platform in 2007.

Complementarity

Complementarity of local and international humanitarian actors offers “an outcome where capacities of local and international partners are harnessed and combined in a way that supports the best humanitarian outcomes”.⁵ Complementarity is therefore an important underlying element of strategic partnerships, but international literature

notes that the capabilities of local partners is often overlooked as the partnership is focusing on back donor requirements.

The case study found that DRC’s partner identification process has been informed by complementarity relating to being local and international humanitarian actors, in addition to complementarity in technical skills.

Complementarity		
Area	Partner contributions	DRC contributions
The local context vs the international situation	Understanding the local context, policies and requirements	Understanding the international landscape, policies and requirements
Local network vs international connectedness	Participation in local civil society actors’ networks and dialogue. Reports with Local Authorities	Participation in International networks
Connectedness and neutrality	Understanding needs and rights of local population and people of concern and speaking their languages	Ensuring Neutrality and Applying the Humanitarian Principles in humanitarian situations
Funding	Linkages to local charities and public funding	Expertise in applying for funding from international donor

The case study has identified a number of good practices with regard to complementarity in partnerships.

- In Italy, complementarity in the understanding of the local context and local connectedness versus having linkages to international and EU level networks formed part of the partner identification process. This practice could be formalised and used in other contexts as well.
- DRC’s strategy for Abkhazia acknowledges the complementarity of DRC and the local partners and states how DRC will assist partners to further technical complementarity. Including an analysis of complementarities in DRC country plans could also strengthen the partnership approach in other contexts.

- In Italy, Esserci and DRC have formalised the understanding of strategic value addition of both the partner and DRC in the MoU. This has helped ensure that complementarity is acknowledged and form part of the partnership reflections, a practice that could be replicated in other partnerships.

Partners and DRC seem to have overcome the challenge that the capabilities of local organisations are often not valued, as capabilities are typically defined by back donor’s requirements for handling of project funds. To further strengthen the complementarity in DRC’s partnerships it is recommended to formalise the analysis of the strategic value addition of DRC and partners in DRC country strategies.

⁵ Veronique Barbellet, Human Policy Group Rethinking capacity and complementarity for a more local humanitarian action, 2019.

Capacity Development

International organisations often promote a one-way capacity development process where the international actor supports its local partner to implement projects in accordance with donor requirements. Acknowledging that also local partners need to work in accordance with international requirements for anti-corruption, safeguarding and non-discrimination, DRC applies a Capacity Assessment tool to assess risks when sub-contracting a partner. The case study revealed that partners in Abkhazia found the capacity assessment process helpful, whereas partners in Italy found that the application of the tool time consuming in consideration to the funding level.

The importance of a capacity analysis ensuring mutual learning is not a significant focus in DRC's current capacity assessment tool. DRC has the intention to revise its approach to capacity assessments to reflect the position in the Global Civil Society Engagement Strategy – emphasizing recognizing local capacities and facilitating mutual learning. It is recommended that the complementarity analysis suggested above could form the basis for a mutual capacity analysis tool.

The case study identified a number of informal good practices (outside of the assessment stage) supporting mutual capacity strengthening.

- In Italy, **deployment, accompaniment, and on-the-job learning** was found relevant and suitable as the primary vehicle for mutual capacity development.
- In Abkhazia, **sharing of premises** with informal communication and closeness has built trust and has allowed partners and DRC to establish a common understanding as the basis for mutual capacity strengthening.
- DRC has also supported partners in both Italy and Abkhazia to be part of international networks as a vehicle for partners to establish an international perspective on their engagement areas.

Drawing from the positive learnings related to mutual capacity development based on complementarity, it is recommended that DRC investigates how accompaniment and close dialogue based on trust can be established in partnerships in general. Furthermore, DRC could consider how it can support learning across partners in a regional or national contexts through networking and structured exchange of knowledge.

Accompaniment

DRC's primary approaches to capacity development in Italy have been deployment, accompaniment, and on-the-job training. Accompaniment is the process of collective learning between actors with different levels or areas of expertise, working together in relation to concrete tasks managed by the actor or staff being accompanied. This has been relevant and suitable, also for smaller and volunteer-driven organisations where resources for more formal or longer-term – away from job – capacity development is a challenge. The deployment of staff within ESSERCI has been an effective modality for capacity exchange.

Good Practices: Capacity development through working together

Working closely together and sharing premises has promoted an informal and open culture where DRC and partners understand each other's strengths, as well as the challenges each partner faces. Sharing premises is not always an option, but the closeness and increased mutual understanding from working together could also be promoted through second-ments or similar accompaniment. Benefits include:

- The informal communication and closeness in the partnership promotes trust in the partnership
- The closeness in the partnership is also an important promoter of equality and transparency in the partnership
- Working close to each other provides a good understanding of the capabilities of partners and DRC and how partners and DRC can most effectively contribute to activities and projects
- Mutual understanding is an important element for the further development of strategic and equitable partnerships



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• We are there