

BUILDING STRONGER CSOS: STRATEGY, STRUCTURE & SUSTAINABILITY

Participant Workbook & Learning Guide

"Strong civil society organizations are built intentionally—through clear strategy, sound structure, and sustainable systems."

Introduction

Welcome to this interactive learning session designed to help your CSO grow stronger and more resilient. This workbook includes reflection questions, activities, tools and a case study to reinforce your learning and will serve as a practical guide you can take back to your organization.

How to Use This Workbook

- **Reflection Questions:** Pause to jot down your thoughts.
- **Activities:** Work through exercises individually or in groups.
- **Case Studies:** Learn from real-world examples.
- **Tools & Templates:** Apply these directly to your CSO.

Section 1: Organizational Development (OD) Fundamentals

What is Organizational Development?

Definition: A systematic approach to improving an organization's effectiveness, adaptability, and sustainability.

Why It Matters for CSOs:

- Ensures alignment between mission, strategy, and operations.
- Builds trust with donors, beneficiaries, and regulators.
- Prepares your organization for long-term impact.

Key Elements of OD

Element	Key Questions	Your CSO's Status (✓)
Vision/Mission	Is our purpose clear to all stakeholders?	☐ Strong ☐ Needs Work
Strategy	Do we have a realistic roadmap for impact?	☐ Strong ☐ Needs Work
Structure	Are roles and decision-making processes clear?	☐ Strong ☐ Needs Work
Systems	Do we have policies for HR, finance, operations?	☐ Strong ☐ Needs Work
Culture	Do staff share values and collaborate well?	☐ Strong ☐ Needs Work

Reflection: Which element is strongest in your CSO? Which needs the most attention?

Section 2: Building Effective Internal Policies

Why Policies Matter

- **Accountability:** Clear rules reduce conflicts and mismanagement.
- **Compliance:** Meets legal and donor requirements.
- **Efficiency:** Saves time by documenting processes.

Essential Policies for CSOs

Policy Area	Why It's Important	Example from a Real CSO
HR Policies	Ensures fair treatment of staff.	<i>A Nigerian NGO reduced turnover by 30% after implementing a staff handbook.</i>
Finance Policies	Prevents fraud and ensures transparency.	<i>A Kenyan CSO lost funding due to missing receipts—now they use digital tracking.</i>
Operational Policies	Streamlines daily work.	<i>A South African group improved project delivery by creating a communication protocol.</i>

THE FALL AND RISE OF GREEN HORIZONS INITIATIVE (GHI)

Background:

Green Horizons Initiative (GHI), an environmental advocacy CSO based in Lagos, experienced rapid growth after receiving multi-year grants from international donors focused on climate resilience. To meet grant conditions, GHI produced key policies—including on HR, finance, procurement, and safeguarding—but these were developed hurriedly by external consultants with little staff involvement or internal capacity building.

- Project funds were frequently disbursed without following the documented procurement process. Field officers claimed urgency due to “environmental factors” like flood season.
- A junior finance officer and a vendor conspired to inflate project costs, misappropriating over ₦6 million over eight months.
- Staff at the community level noticed irregularities but lacked clear reporting channels.
- GHI’s Board, mostly made up of friends of the founder, rarely met and did not review audit reports.
- Internal audit findings, though submitted, were never acted upon due to fear of destabilizing “high-performing” teams.

The Breaking Point:

- An aggrieved ex-employee, having access to a key staff member from the donor, initiated a conversation about the inconsistencies at GHI. The donor investigated the inconsistencies leading to GHI’s lead donor suspended funding and issued a compliance audit ultimatum.
- Local partner organisations withdrew from joint initiatives to protect their reputations.
- The case escalated to the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission after which GHI faced heavy sanctions.

The Turnaround:

Facing the fallout, GHI’s Executive Director publicly acknowledged governance lapses and sought help from a Nigerian CSO capacity-building network. An independent audit confirmed systemic failures—not just fraud, but poor staff orientation, low board engagement, and policy disconnect.

Reforms and Recovery:

- **Policy Revamp:** Internal policies were reviewed with input from all departments. Annual refresher sessions were made mandatory.
- **Board Restructuring:** Two independent experts were added to the Board, which now meets quarterly and signs off on audits.
- **Whistleblower Mechanism:** A confidential SMS line was launched in partnership with a local tech firm.

- **Cultural Shift:** The Executive Director introduced monthly "transparency town halls" for staff Q&A, building a culture of openness.

After a couple of years, GHI regained partial donor support and passed its next compliance audit. Internal survey results showed a 75% increase in staff confidence in reporting irregularities. A partner CSO also invited GHI to co-lead a national policy dialogue, signaling restored credibility.

Self-Evaluation:

- Do your policies exist only "on paper"? How well are they understood and used by your team?
- If a similar scandal hit your CSO, how ready would your systems and leadership be to respond?
- Beyond fraud, what risks do Nigerian CSOs face from policy neglect? (e.g., loss of NGO registration, donor blacklisting, local media scrutiny)
- How can power dynamics—such as founder dominance or staff silence—intensify those risks?

Activity: Policy Gap Analysis

1. List the policies your CSO already has.
2. Identify 1-2 critical policies you're missing.
3. **Action Step:** *Who needs to approve new policies?*
4. What's one policy your CSO should "bring to life" this quarter? (E.g., Staff Code of Conduct, Conflict of Interest Policy)
5. Who needs to be involved to integrate it—staff, Board, partners?
6. *Set a deadline to draft one.*

Section 3: Risk Mitigation for CSOs

Common CSO Risks

Risk Type	Example	Mitigation Strategy
Financial	Unapproved expenses lead to audit failures.	Implement an expense approval system.
Reputational	A staff scandal damages trust.	Enforce a Code of Conduct.
Operational	Project delays due to poor planning.	Use a project management tool (e.g., Trello).

Risk Assessment Framework

1. **Identify Risks:** Brainstorm potential threats.
2. **Assess Likelihood & Impact:** Rate each risk (Low/Medium/High).
3. **Respond:** Develop prevention strategies.
4. **Monitor:** Review risks quarterly.

"The Fraud That Could Have Been Prevented"

GHI's risks were not just financial—they were cultural, operational, and reputational. Mitigation required systemic change.

Group Discussion:

- *What early warning signs did GHI miss? How can your CSO monitor these?*
- *Share a time when "shortcuts" in your CSO led to bigger problems.*

Section 4: The OD Maturity Model

Where Does Your CSO Stand?

Where was GHI on the maturity model at its lowest point? Where is it now?

Level	Characteristics	Your Self-Assessment
Basic (Reactive)	Few policies, firefighting mode.	☐ Here ☐ Moving Up
Developing (Structured)	Some systems, but inconsistent.	☐ Here ☐ Moving Up
Mature (Sustainable)	Strategic, adaptive, policy-driven.	☐ Here ☐ Moving Up

Activity: OD Progress Plan

1. Mark your CSO's current level.
2. Choose **one area** to improve in the next 6 months.
3. **Action Step:** *What's the first small step you'll take?*

Section 5: Putting It All Together

Key Takeaways

1. **Strong policies = stronger CSOs.** Start with one missing policy.
2. **Proactively manage risks** to avoid crises.
3. **OD is a journey**—progress matters more than perfection.

Commitment to Action

Write down one change you'll implement within 30 days:

- Example: *"Draft a Finance Policy by next month.", or "Conduct a fraud-risk assessment with our finance team by [date]."*
- Share their action plans with a colleague for accountability.
- Distribute templates digitally for easy adaptation.

Final Thought:

"The best time to strengthen your CSO was yesterday. The second-best time is today."