The last mile:  
AVSI’s strategic partnership with Civil Society Organizations  

July 2015

1. AVSI  
2. General framework  
3. CSOs in the international debate  
4. AVSI’s services for local partner CSOs  
5. Experiences from AVSI’s network  
   5.1 Education  
   5.2 Healthcare  
   5.3 Food security and Peasant Organizations  
   5.4 Human Rights

1. AVSI

AVSI Foundation is a global non-governmental organization headquartered in Italy. Its mission is to support human development in developing countries according to the social teaching of the Catholic Church: every person, as a unique being, and every community represent a resource regardless of their vulnerability and should not be reduced to a number within anonymous categories like “the poor”, “the sick”, or “the disabled”. AVSI works to help people become aware of their own value and dignity, and to become the protagonist of sustainable development.

AVSI is engaged at the present time in 136 projects in 30 developing countries worldwide in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Middle East and Asia. AVSI's holistic approach to sustainable development shapes its activities around several areas such as education and social development, urban development, healthcare, employment, agriculture, food security and water, energy and environment, humanitarian emergency and migration. AVSI reaches more than 4.000.000 direct beneficiaries each year.

AVSI’s human capital includes 1.280 people of which the great majority are local staff, in addition more than 1.250 volunteers each year support AVSI in Italy and abroad conducting awareness and fund raising initiatives.

On average in the last recent years AVSI received from institutional and private donors (respectively around 43% and 57%) contributions for a total amount of over 45 million euro (AVSI worldwide). Among its major institutional donors and partners are the Italian Government, the European Union, USAID, FAO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and ILO. AVSI is ECOSOC and UN Global Compact accredited.

AVSI partners with over 700 firms and organizations, including NGOs, public and local institutions, CBOs, informal groups, and multinational and local enterprises. More than 60 organizations are incorporated into a wide “AVSI network”, which works systematically on the implementation of projects, sharing methods and experiences, discussing sustainable development issues, and facilitating capacity building. From the initial group of 27 founding members, it has become a “network bound by an operative friendship.”
2. General Framework

Civil society, organized into entities with varying levels of formality and a full range of goals and ideals, has a central role in development, as it is the best expression of the modality adopted by the human community to respond to people’s needs. Businesses and associations provide goods and services to the person, the family and the community.

Therefore, development is sustainable as much as it starts from the talent and desire proper to the person, and in that it meets its target: the actual needs of the person.

According to the World Economic Forum 2013 report, “The future role of civil society”,¹ the traditional understanding of civil society as distinct from the public and private sectors is fading; rather, civil society is becoming the glue that binds together researchers, corporations, public institutions and the people. AVSI’s 40 years of experience in development has demonstrated that, in the poorest countries and for the most marginalized populations, it is the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) who cover the “last mile”, acting as the necessary link between the social infrastructure that provides goods and services (private or public) and the single person who is often not reached.

Generally perceived as a “social cost” or “burden”, vulnerable people are now instead seen as a great resource for the future, especially for our world in the midst of a crisis and in search of new paradigms to move forward again. In order for this to happen, we need inclusive and sustainable growth which strengthens intermediary organizations that link the person and formal society².

In this sense, CSOs providing services have a public civil and social dignity, and their contribution is to be measured in terms of the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of their service and their capacity to include otherwise marginalized people.

The identity of such organizations is crucial, because it defines the ‘how’ and ‘why’ motivating their work. Severing the tie between a CSO and its identity or constituency, that part of society from which it originated, would significantly reduce its added value.

In some African countries, 70% of health services are provided by faith-based organizations (FBOs)³.

A study from the World Bank highlights the important role of FBOs in the education sector: in Sierra Leone, for instance, over 50% of educational services are provided by FBOs⁴.

It is in the best interest of public institutions and the international development mechanisms to acknowledge this contribution and to adopt legislative and financial initiatives to support the CSOs active on the ground: to improve their quality, know-how, community-based approach and scale-up of services.

The Economist⁵ recently published an article on welfare in the Nordic countries. Though these countries still have the world’s most generous welfare states, a succession of crises is putting an end to the region’s magical thinking about welfare.

The Swedes have implemented a school voucher program, allowing parents to send their children to whichever school they choose and inviting private companies or not-for-profit associations to establish independent schools. Almost half of the country’s schoolchildren choose not to go to their local public school.

3. CSOs in the international debate

The contribution of CSOs to development in low-income contexts has already been acknowledged by the EU, in its “Agenda for change,” which commits to work “more closely” with civil society as its role in development grows and states that it has also been building a “structured dialogue”.

Reviewing other documents regarding the current agenda of the international community, we find many that show this growing implication of CSOs: various EU communications (“A decent life for all”, Feb 2013; ...

¹ The future role of civil society. World Economic Forum – KPMG, 2013
³ The future role of civil society. p. 12
We would like to highlight some key points and offer recommendations for the global agenda on CSOs:

a. CSOs are frequently seen as merely watchdogs for institution-driven processes. However, as noted in “The Future Role of Civil Society”, CSOs are actually taking a multi-faceted role in a changing landscape: as watchdog, advocate, service provider, expert, capacity builder, incubator, representative, citizenship champion, solidarity supporter and definer of standards.  

b. The aid system should adapt to these varied tasks of CSOs. For example, the risks of budget support can be mitigated in a positive way through the involvement of CSOs not simply for consultation, but also as effective providers of services and technical assistance, acting in the interest of the local community and its vulnerable members. For this, the “policy dialogue” that was introduced by the EU for the management of budget support is crucial.

c. National legislation, especially in developing countries, should acknowledge and facilitate the concrete approaches and initiatives of CSOs through an appropriate enabling environment.

d. Development aid is often managed by “vertical processes”, segmenting responses to various needs. Contrastingly, human nature requires an integrated, holistic approach. The paradigm of sustainable development with its 3 components (human rights, economy and environment), integrated with due attention to improved governance, pushes us in this direction (though not without some difficulties).

e. Monitoring, evaluation and knowledge sharing of CSOs’ good practices can increase the impact of interventions and favor the scaling-up of single experiences.

f. The strengthening of mixed funding mechanisms, such as vouchers, public-private and corporate-social partnerships, will facilitate the creation of multi-stakeholder processes which are more fitting to today’s complex society. In this, the alliance between the public sector and local authorities, private sector, civil society, and research bodies is crucial.

g. Financing mechanisms and policies aimed to build the capacities of CSOs in various aspects—governance, accountability and transparency—should be created or protected, based on CSOs’ performance in service to the people.

h. It is important to continually strengthen the relationship between CSOs and their “constituencies”, with the aim of improving their representativeness and motivation to pursue their mission.

4. AVSI’s services for local partner CSOs

AVSI offers support and guidance to CSOs in the following areas:

- Area governance: assistance in strengthening the liaison between management and constituency
- Area management: assistance in the definition of the mission, the goals, and planning
- Area organization: assistance in establishing an appropriate organizational structure, proper job descriptions, and related management system
- Area fundraising: approach to institutional and private fundraising in a creative way
- Area communications and relationship with stakeholders: assistance in the definition of targets, tools and strategies according to the different stakeholders
- Administration and control: assistance in managerial control system
- Area quality of service: assessment and classification of the service in terms of training for the staff, improvement of office facilities, safety system; networking and collaboration with other actors in order to complement and advance the services as well as strengthen CSOs’ effectiveness in the area.

---

6 The future role of civil society, p. 9.
7 See ie “Budget support guidelines”, 2012; “The future of EU budget support to third countries”, 2010
8 UNSDN (www.unsdn.org) is in this sense an appreciable initiative.
The assistance provided to CSOs consists of:
- Technical assistance (assessment, coaching, follow-up)
- Formal training (online and face-to-face instruction)
- On the job training and job rotation in order to share professional experiences and validate particular capability.

Indicators:
- Ability to access to existing funds
- Life span
- Competent and effective ability to create liaisons with Institutions and Local Authorities.

Among AVSI’s experiences the most significant examples are:

**Successful assistance and support to local partners:** ACDI (Argentina), Fundatia (Romania), Shis (Albania), DJIO and CSJ (Mexico).

**Strengthening of local networking** particularly in Brazil within the *Riberia Azul* Project where great support is given to local NGOs and grassroots organizations. Same in Ivory Coast, with two local partners AJECI and O.GRA.DI.E for education and healthcare to vulnerable youth.

### 5. Experiences from AVSI’s network

#### 5.1 Education

AVSI considers education, formal and informal, crucial for development. More than 90,000 children and their families benefit each year from AVSI’s activities in this field. This includes, but is not limited to, preschool to secondary school, extracurricular activities, vocational training with complementary attention to work placement, and educational activities to train educators.

Within the **“Our Valuable Children”** (OVC) program, which involved approximately 15,000 children in vulnerable situations in Uganda, Rwanda and Kenya, the rate of school retention reached 90%, thanks to the presence of social workers who personally monitored and accompanied the children and their families.

At Holy Family School in Mayenkineh **Junior and Senior Secondary Education in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in 2012, 100% of the students passed the National Primary School Examination and the Basic Education Certificate Examination and** at the junior secondary level the school resulted the second best school in Sierra Leone. Teachers and educators are continuously trained and for this reason now the training programs are extended to the staff of other five schools in the area.

Little Prince Primary School in Nairobi, Kenya, a school in the Kibera slum, enrolls children (65% of whom are girls) through a voucher system for those who cannot pay fees, made possible through the Distance Support Program sponsored by Italian families. The dropout rate is 7%, much below the national average of 35%. Since 2001, 94% of the students resulted qualified to proceed to secondary school while the national average is 79%.

At Otunga Secondary School Kenya, located in KAHAWA SUKARI at the outskirts of Nairobi, the performance is very high considering that in 2015, 88% of the students are qualified for college against the national average of 12%. The average score in 2013 resulted 7.6 while in 2014 increased to 8.03. In 2014 the school resulted the best school in the district and within the 100 best private schools in Kenya out of a total of 2000.
5.2 Healthcare
FREE – Uganda – Preventing Mother-To-Child HIV Transmission (PMTCT)
Some indicators of FREE results between 2002 and 2012:
- 197,343 mothers have received HIV-prevention services;
- 187,002 pregnant women have been pre-test counseled;
- 4,713 at-risk infants have been born HIV-negative;
- 43,441 male partners accessed HIV-prevention services;
- Estimated annual cost per woman: 4.26 USD.

In this field, the partnership between public and private is fundamental in order to find new treatments through research, and to be able to implement them. For the latter, CSOs such as AVSI are vital in covering the last mile to get state-provided medications to the people who need them. Faith-based organizations (FBOs) are acknowledged as key actors in the treatment and prevention of this HIV/AIDS, particularly for education and to cover the “last mile”. Thanks to their knowledge of the local context, they provide extensive service coverage with a limited cost per person. In its documents, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria is exemplary in its attention to the role of FBOs, acknowledging their presence and action as essential in many developing countries. This notwithstanding, between 2010 and 2011 the Fund allocated a mere 5% of its portfolio to FBOs for health facilities, drugs and health commodities. Furthermore, since 2002 when the Fund was founded, it has only devoted $541 million USD to projects with FBOs, out of a total $22.6 billion USD spent.

St. Joseph’s Hospital – Kitgum, Uganda
AVSI has been working with St. Joseph’s Hospital since the 1980s. Its 350 beds account for 55.6% of the total hospital beds in Kitgum District, which shows how essential this hospital is for the area. AVSI has contributed to improve the quality of pediatric care, the hospital’s nutrition unit, and to increase remote and home care services for HIV-positive children or children with severe health problems. Health centers like St. Joseph’s Hospital have a deep knowledge of health issues, which they address with effectiveness and efficiency. The added value of such services lies in the approach that is used: health is not reduced to a mere lack of illness, but thanks to a holistic vision of the person (the patient), health is conceived as physical, psychological and social well-being.

5.3 Food security and Peasant Organizations
Uganda, SCORE (Sustainable Comprehensive Responses for Vulnerable Children and their Families) program (http://score.or.ug/), funded by USAID and implemented by AVSI and a consortium of NGOs including CARE, TPO and FHI360. This innovative program assists over 25,000 households to set goals and to work together, as a whole, towards those goals with the support of AVSI and local community based organizations. SCORE’s main objectives are:
- To improve the socio-economic status of VC households.
- To improve the food security and nutrition status of VC and their household members.
- To increase availability of Protection and Legal Services for VC and their household members (Child Protection).
- To increase capacity of vulnerable women and children and their households to access, acquire or provide critical services (Family strengthening).

9 In 2002, in collaboration with the Uganda Health Ministry, AVSI launched Free, a program whose main goal is preventing mother-to-child HIV transmission. An integral approach and due consideration of education are core elements for the success of this program. Free. 10 years of PMTCT in Uganda. 10 years of children born free from HIV. Fondazione AVSI, 2012. www.avsi-free.org
10 www.theglobalfund.org
13 Created as a clinic by Comboni missionaries in 1925, ST Joseph’s Hospital became fully operational in 1960. As of June 2011, its patient base is 12,000 people, has 350 beds and 224 staff. St. Joseph’s Hospital Kitgum, Annual Analytical Report 2010/2011
This program brings a great newness in its approach of strengthening community networks and providers and linking them with local referral mechanisms and government initiatives, rather than focusing on ‘handing out’ goods or services.

Regarding the **Socio-Economic Empowerment of the communities**, the SCORE Team strengthened vulnerable households’ economic capacity through the adoption of the **Village Saving and Loans Associations** (VSLA) model which has been shown to maximize cost-effectiveness, sustainability and potential for scale-up. VSLA is a self-selected group of people, (usually unregistered) who pool their money into a fund from which members can borrow. The money is paid back with interest, causing the fund to grow (http://www.vsla.net).

Vulnerable households will be encouraged to associate and will receive intensive training and mentoring on the concepts of internal savings, lending processes and insurance, record keeping, and linking individual savings with investment and wellbeing. Training will also include elements of group solidarity, leadership, group rules and legal information regarding land rights and disputes.

VSLA has remained the most successful and eventful component of SCORE program. In 4 program’s years >1.2m $ has been saved by VSLAs.

**Strengthening the producers’ cooperative (CEPROAA) of Bagua and Utcubamba Provinces in the Amazonas Region, Peru**

The project, funded by the Italian-Peruvian fund (FIP), focuses on 440 coffee and cocoa producers, all members of the CEPROAA cooperative (about 2,640 people— 6 people per household). It aims to strengthen their skills to help increase crop production and sales income, with the ultimate goal of improving their quality of life and that of the whole community, providing indirect benefits for 8,250 other growers in the implementation area.

Some results: coffee productivity increased from 589 to 789.38 Kg/ha and that of cocoa from 444 to 597 Kg/ha (between 2011 and 2013); the number of members of CEPRPAA cooperative increased from 300 to 350; the introduction of improved technology for harvesting, fermentation and drying has increased the quality of the beans allowing producers to obtain a better price in the market and to win major awards in national competitions. Furthermore, CEPROAA cooperative strengthened its organization by reorganizing its book-keeping and working out an Operational Plan and an Internal Control System for organic certification. Assuming their responsibility as lead players, some young farmers even changed the cooperative’s statutes in order to introduce a new body: the **Comité Femenino (Women’s Committee)**. As a rule, the president of this committee is also the vice-president of the cooperative, this way highlighting the importance given to the presence of women and the focus on family farming.

On October 14th–23rd 2014, AVSI presented the project at Eurochocolate World (www.eurochocolate.com), the special section of the Eurochocolate Exhibition dedicated to cocoa-producing countries in the world, sponsored by ICCO-International CoCoa Organization and Fair Trade Italia.

### 5.4 Human Rights

**APACs – Brazil**

The **APACs** (Associations of Protection and Assistance of Prisoners) are correctional facilities integrated in Brazil’s jail system. They are managed by a network of CSOs without the supervision of armed penitentiary officers.

The inmates are guided through a path of recovery, with the promotion of human dignity at its core. The facilities managed by the APACs in the State of Minas Gerais, Brazil, host 2,000 prisoners out of a total of 55,000 detainees. Cost per person is one third that of a conventional prison, and the recidivism rate in the APACs averages around 10%, whereas it is as high as 80-85% in standard prison units.

---

14 For more info on APACs: [http://www.fbac.org.br/](http://www.fbac.org.br/)