



FACILITATING CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS for Promoting Grassroot Efforts for **ENERGY TRANSITION IN INDIA**

Table of Content

Context	1
Conceptual Relevance of Civil Society Efforts	2
Diversity within the civil society sector	2
Integrating different mechanisms for CSO engagement	3
‘Frames’ approach for advancing CSO engagement on energy transition	3
Energy Transition Civil Society Organisations in India: Gap Analysis	4
Future Strategies	8
Summary and Way Forward	10

List of Figures

Figure 1: Conceptual Relevance of CSOs for Energy Transition	4
Figure 2: Dimensions of Energy Transition	5
Figure 3: Gaps in CSOs working on Energy Transition in India	7

List of Table

Table 1: Examples of CSO Efforts Bringing About Social Change: Global and National	1
Table 2: Action–Enabler–Outcome Matrix	10

Context

Promoting grassroots-level efforts for mainstreaming climate-vulnerable communities is an indispensable element of an effective energy transition strategy. Globally, civil society organisations (CSOs), often abbreviated as NGOs (Non-government organisations), are known to play a crucial role in bringing about a positive societal change. Spanning different geographies and sectors, such organisations are critical in building consensus across diverse actors on the vision and roadmap for the future, particularly in matters of public interest and social welfare. CSOs act as a bridge between social, economic and political actors, including governments, businesses and communities. They enable evidence-based decision making by incorporating grassroots perspectives and a knowledge of community needs and wants into decision-making platforms. Their reach across various socio-economic actors enables them to play an indispensable role in the delivery of public services, addressing (technical as well as social) capacity deficits, and acting as anchors for meaningful community participation.

Climate change is a problem of global scale requiring localised solutions. In this context, the role of CSOs in furthering efforts on climate action, including energy transition, is paramount since a transition of energy systems away from fossil fuels will require multi-actor, multi-disciplinary and participatory processes of knowledge creation and sharing. This work could include efforts towards infrastructure creation, local economic development, issues related to quality of life, livelihoods, or addressing sectoral concerns in agriculture, energy, transport, and other economic sectors, all of which CSOs can work on. Despite this, only a handful of CSOs are currently working at local levels in India.

Globally, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have a rich history of working across social justice and development issues such as access to education, healthcare, women empowerment or more recently, digital literacy and equitable energy access. Several case studies demonstrate the promise and potential of CSOs in bringing about positive social change. Some of the relevant global and national examples are highlighted in Table 1.



Table 1: Examples of CSO Efforts Bringing About Social Change: Global and National

However, as we transition to a low carbon economy, there is a need for CSOs to adopt a 'systems change approach'¹ and build capacities to address the complex needs of this transition. This is because it is not only about energy supply but also the application of energy in agriculture, health, MSMEs etc. and its

¹ "Systems change is an intentional process designed to alter the status quo by shifting the function or structure of an identified system with purposeful intervention. Systems change aims to bring about lasting change by altering underlying structures and supporting mechanisms that make the system operate in a particular way. This can include policies, routines, relationships, resources, power structures, and values." https://www.thinknpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/NPC_Systems-Change_Final.pdf

outcomes on productivity, employment, income, and the well-being of last-mile communities. As the demand for climate action increases, all existing economic sectors will be reconstituted as a series of complex, interconnected, emissions free systems encompassing energy, mobility, manufacturing, agriculture, land use and forestry. Hence, this complex intersection demands a deep understanding of energy systems, enabling policy frameworks, and the potential trade-offs involved in transitioning to clean energy sources.

CSOs in India face several financial, technical and social capacity constraints in navigating the multi-faceted and rapidly evolving landscape of energy transition in India. To comprehensively explore how CSOs can promote effective, responsible and localised efforts to further energy transition in India, the first step is to explore some of the challenges and potential ways to address them.

This knowledge brief aims to decipher how CSOs' work can be further supported for the purpose of achieving a fair, equitable, sustainable and responsible energy transition. Towards this endeavor, this knowledge brief is divided into the following sections – civil society and energy transition in India; gap analysis; strategies for scaling-up CSO work in energy transition; and way forward.

Conceptual Relevance of Civil Society Efforts

Academic research in the context of climate change and energy transition indicates that CSOs contribute to international environmental governance^{2, 3, 4} to social movements⁵ and aim to influence political decision-makers, industry, and individual behavioral change.⁶ At the same time, being an actor that is both an organisation and aims to contribute to social movements comes with challenges. These challenges include how to communicate with a diverse constituency^{7, 8} how to make decisions when organisational needs compete with their social movement goals, and how to stay legitimate in the eyes of other actors.⁹

In this context, we highlight three conceptual facets pertaining to civil society organisations and India's tryst with energy transition that are relevant for devising future philanthropic strategies in this space.

Diversity within the civil society sector

Firstly, the civil society space is a diverse one with different meanings and connotations. A plethora of terms have emerged over time, such as Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Interest groups, Community Based Organisations (CBOs), Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), Not-for-profits, or third sector organisations, to name a few. However, there is a notable distinction between civil society 'space' and 'sector'. While the former represents a more fluid arena comprising multiple types of actors, including journalists, activists, worker unions, public sector professionals in health, education and other such fields, the latter represents a relatively more mature categorisation of actors that are more organised and bounded by some common traits, corresponding mostly to not-for-profit organisations. Further, the scale of operation may vary depending on the geographies and sectors they work within.

2 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0301479719313714>

3 [https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-1328\(199907/08\)11:5%3C687::AID-JID600%3E3.0.CO;2-2](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/(SICI)1099-1328(199907/08)11:5%3C687::AID-JID600%3E3.0.CO;2-2)

4 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3993270>

5 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09644016.2018.1536293>

6 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/257548321_Meat_consumption_and_climate_change_The_role_of_non-governmental_organizations

7 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371889648_Unlocking_Success_in_NGOs_The_Power_of_Servant_Leadership/fulltext/649adf7db9e-d6874a5de770f/Unlocking-Success-in-NGOs-The-Power-of-Servant-Leadership.pdf

8 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2514848619866381>

9 <https://pure.rug.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/13811396/OssewaardeR-Dynamics-2008.pdf>

Integrating different mechanisms for CSO engagement

Secondly, the modus operandi, structural and functional mechanisms through which CSOs operate offer crucial insights. There are different types of models through which CSOs work.¹⁰ Through these models, they can integrate efforts towards an energy transition. Some examples are listed below:

1. **Market model** – in which CSOs can be theorised as private actors offering alternative ways to deliver governmental services and policies, whether domestic or international. **Investments and market growth in green industries can be supported through this model.**
2. **Social change model** – in which CSOs are legitimised as fulfilling a civic duty that is essential to a liberal democratic system and seen as intrinsically good for society. **This can enable them to catalyse social acceptance of climate action or energy transitions.**
3. **New institutional model** – where the research focus shifts to CSOs involvement in decision-making, **allowing them to work alongside policymakers and bring about a larger impact.**
4. **Critical model** – in which CSOs may be seen as a political entities acting as pathways to empower those who are disadvantaged or excluded from the decision-making processes in society. This can include **actively working with trade unions and other social groups to inform policy and ensure fair and equitable energy transitions.**

We need to integrate approaches combining research, advocacy, traditional knowledge, and access to technology to create transformational strategies¹¹. However, to ensure that the benefits of the energy transition reach the most vulnerable communities, it is essential to prioritise on-ground project implementation and local empowerment.

‘Frames’ approach for advancing CSO engagement on energy transition

In political and social terms, ‘framing’ is a very powerful and strategic approach to mobilising action. It helps connect unrelated themes, reframe older issues into new ones, or extend and adapt them for strategic use. For example, governments and non-state actors reframed ‘environmentalism’ as ‘sustainable development’, enabling business actors to collaborate on environmental issues.¹²

The theoretical frameworks around ‘frames’¹³ points to the agility of energy transition works by onboarding multiple themes of work. Frame bridging, for instance, might involve linking techno-economic work with the concept of energy justice. Similarly, frame amplification could challenge the myth that energy justice and rapid technological advancements in green energy are necessarily pitted against each other and cannot be achieved simultaneously. Frame extension can involve integrating different conceptualisations of justice (restorative, transformative, procedural, participatory, etc.) with diverse frameworks of transition such as those from the fields of sustainability studies, agrarian research, natural resource governance, science and technology studies and so on.

¹⁰ https://pure.manchester.ac.uk/ws/files/158669065/thrandardottir_ngo_legitimacy_published_Copy.pdf

¹¹ https://avpn.asia/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/AVPN-Arthan-Report_Analysing-Constraints-for-Systems-Change-_16April2024.pdf

¹² Ruzza, C. (2004). Europe and civil society: Movement coalitions and European governance. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

¹³ The key processes of the ‘Frames’ theory comprise of: frame bridging (linkage of two or more ideologically congruent or related themes), frame amplification (clearing myths or uncertainties around different, often deceptive, understandings around a particular problem), frame extension (implying working on tertiary or indirectly connected themes of any particular issue, especially the ones which are not as evident and obvious as others) and frame transformation (referring to a systemic alteration which radically transforms beliefs, ideas, notions and actions in response to an ever evolving problem).

These conceptual facets of CSOs' engagement with socio-economic dimensions of developmental themes in general, and energy transitions are summarised in Figure 1.

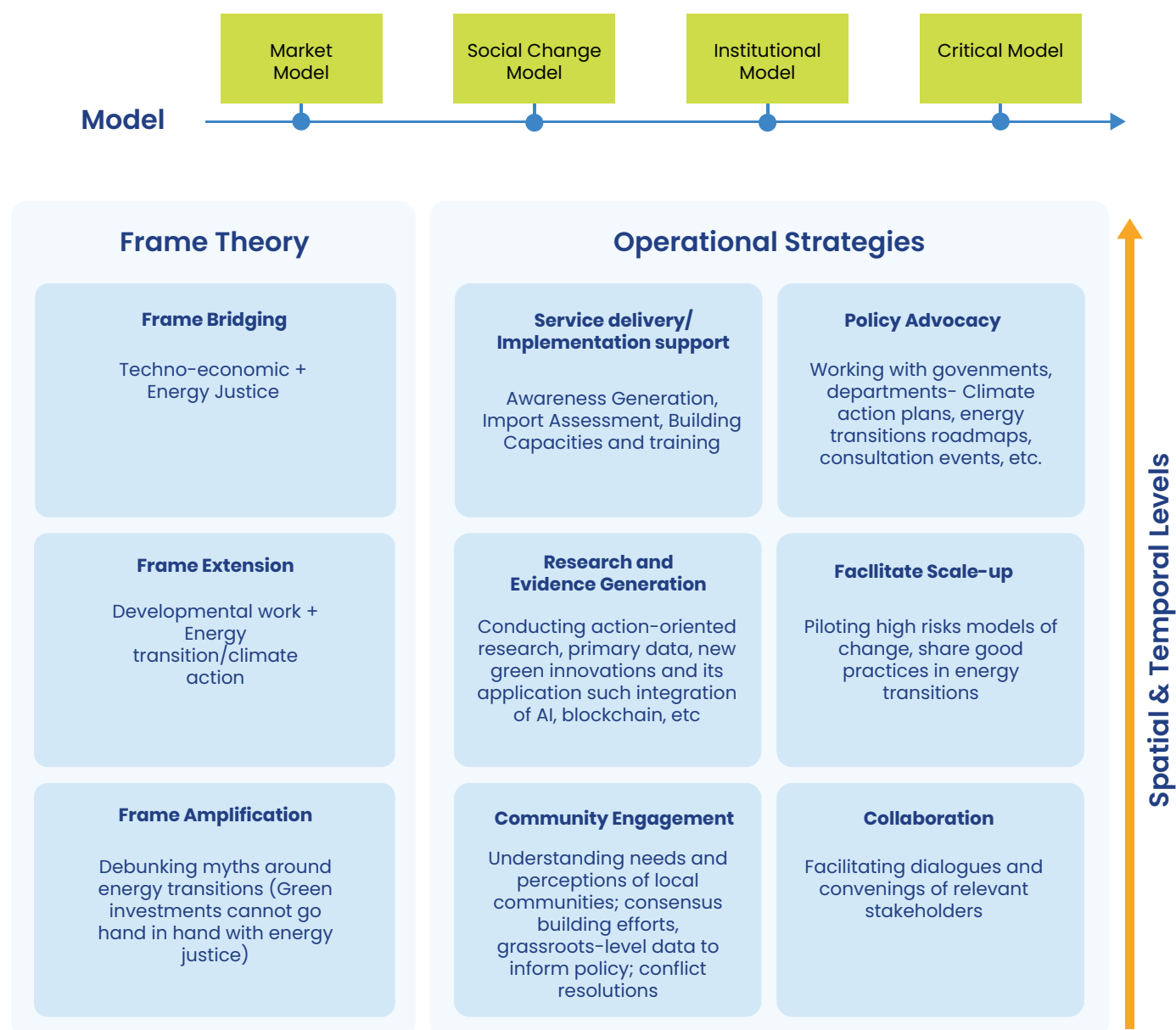


Figure 1: Conceptual Relevance of CSOs for Energy Transition

The next section builds on some of these conceptual ideas to highlight existing gaps and future potential of CSO efforts that can help further energy transitions in India.

Energy Transition Civil Society Organisations in India: Gap Analysis

Literature on energy transitions point to the argument that scaling up energy transition across geographies and sectors will require efforts on addressing techno-economic aspects, environmental issues, political concerns, legal aspects, institutional and other context-specific nuances. Such diverse types of issues can be categorised in three themes¹⁴ –

¹⁴ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666759223001038>

1. **Energy infrastructures** – dealing with physical and technical aspects of infrastructure-level transition in energy systems across different economic sectors;
2. **Energy epistemics** – relates to knowledge and evidence generation, dissemination and utilisation for informing policy and practice around different facets of energy transitions; and,
3. **Energy justice** – looking at ways to ensure energy transition towards low-carbon alternatives is done in a manner that it neither perpetuates nor creates injustices, particularly for historically disadvantaged and climate-vulnerable communities.

Such themes, when blended with the nature of efforts that CSOs can perform, as illustrated in Figure 1, points towards multiple strategical pillars that are being taken up by civil society actors. These strategic pillars are summarised in Figure 2.

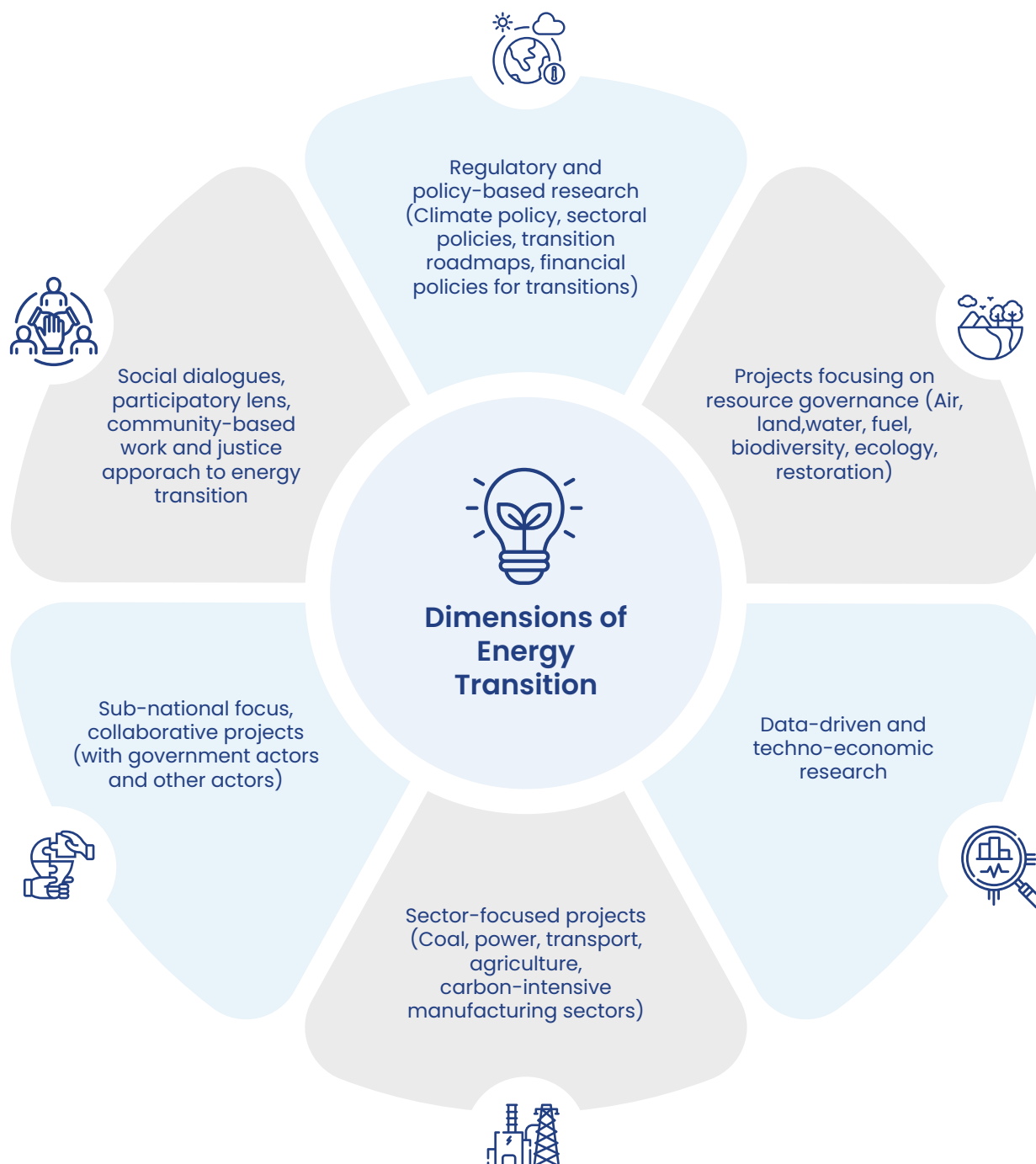


Figure 2: Dimensions of Energy Transition

From desk-based and discussion-based research conducted for the purpose of this knowledge product, we present five major types of gaps in CSOs' trust with energy transition efforts in India.

- ◆ **Thematic constraints** – Given the wide scope of facets within an energy transition that requires inter-disciplinary work across several themes and sub-themes, it has been highlighted that CSOs tend to focus on low-hanging fruit initially. This implies that energy transition related themes that are relatively familiar to the civil society and think-tank space, or themes prioritized by policymakers or philanthropic organisations in their vision documents, or themes that a CSO can address using their existing technical capabilities, are more likely to be taken up than others. For instance, issues pertaining to techno-economic studies around low-carbon technologies, survey-based projects showcasing trends and findings from communities, drafting roadmaps and policy briefs for government agencies, and other similar efforts are prominent in existing initiatives. Themes that require new capacities, or acceptance from governments or philanthropic organisations, remain those that still require more work.¹⁵ These may include active outreach and engagement strategies with social groups and communities, qualitative field-based projects, more grounded work on energy justice aspects of transition, developing bottom-up frameworks, recommending transparent and participatory processes for transition, and bridging the gap between investments and sustainability aspects of transition, among others.¹⁶

For this reason, even sector-wise there is a predominance of CSO efforts in power, coal and to an extent transportation sector, while research on land-use, resource governance, socio-economic impacts, farmer-centric projects on sustainable agriculture, and similar areas remains underexplored.

- ◆ **Geographical limitations** – Given a skewed concentration of CSOs, especially the prominent think-tanks being centered in Delhi, or other metropolitan cities or state capitals, there exists a geographical limitation in furthering energy transition efforts in remote, peri-urban and rural regions. This also stems from the argument that a major factor determining the geographical location for CSOs' activities is their proximity to government and state agencies. Larger CSOs and think tanks also work on aspects requiring global and national attention and thus have stronger reach within governments, other larger organisations and donors.

Whereas CSOs with a narrower regional influence tend to work on domestic energy related issues and grassroots problems.¹⁷ **Hence, grassroots organisations, though well-versed in local context, may not always prioritise energy transition as a core focus area.** There is a need to support CSOs working in remote areas to onboard 'Climate Action or Energy Transition or Low Carbon Development' as a concrete strategic theme and integrate it with their ongoing work on other socio-developmental themes such as health, education, labour rights etc. Thus, there exists a gap and an opportunity to entrust grassroots organisations working on developmental issues with projects around energy transition.

- ◆ **Internal Capacity Development** – Given the nuanced and diverse nature of the thematic, sectoral and geographical facets of energy transition efforts by CSOs in India, several reports have highlighted gaps in the internal skills and capabilities of such organisations.¹⁸ These gaps range from **having professionals skilled in emerging software tools such as GIS and remote sensing, energy modelling to developing business development capabilities, qualitative and quantitative research skills, outreach and communication, theme-based expertise and creative content skills. These gaps were particularly evident during our discussions with CSOs.** Literature also reaffirms these findings, with experts noting that many CSOs, particularly those working in remote grassroots contexts, lack the technical and financial capacity to convey their arguments and findings in a presentable format and to explore avenues for raising funds for their work.¹⁹

15 <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/22707/wp249.pdf>

16 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373665379_The_Social_Aspects_of_India's_Energy_Transition

17 <https://academic.oup.com/book/35227/chapter/299753019/chapter-pdf/53437159/oso-9780199498734-chapter-15.pdf>

18 https://www.cif.org/sites/cif_enc/files/knowledge-documents/supporting_just_transitions_in_india.pdf

19 <https://shaktifoundation.in/how-indian-civil-society-organizations-help-tackle-the-climate-crisis/>

- ◆ **Financial Constraints** – Many CSOs, particularly those working in remote areas on socio-developmental issues, claim they find it difficult to raise funds for their activities and new project ideas. **Legal and regulatory hurdles, internal capacity constraints (as discussed in the previous section) and limited to networking capabilities with domestic and international funding organisations were also highlighted as key challenges.** Furthermore, several CSO representatives expressed difficulties in using existing funds for internal capacity building, as these are largely theme-oriented or deliverable-focused.
- ◆ **Strategic Challenges** – There is a need for CSOs and other state and non-state actors to adapt to a rapidly-changing energy transition landscape across temporal and spatial frames. For instance, energy transition discourse has evolved rapidly from concerns of energy access, economic viability of green energy technologies and enabling infrastructure to emerging narratives on institutional governance, clean energy adoption, energy justice, livelihoods, ecological restoration, and other similar themes. Therefore, with a rapidly evolving landscape and context-specificity due to temporal and spatial factors, CSOs often find themselves lagging in adapting to some of these changes in discourse.

Another strategic challenge results from an apparent divide between vertical and horizontal levels and agencies where CSO work is needed. National, regional, state, district, municipal and panchayats, and even block or tehsil level efforts require CSO engagement. In addition to these vertical nodes, multiple institutions, actors, sectors and geographies require differentiated efforts and collective action in the energy transition space. **To align capabilities with the evolving landscape, a vertically and horizontally diverse spectrum of actors and contexts requires continuous efforts that equip CSOs to operate effectively.**

Figure 3 summarises the key gaps that CSOs face while working on energy transition related topics and research projects.

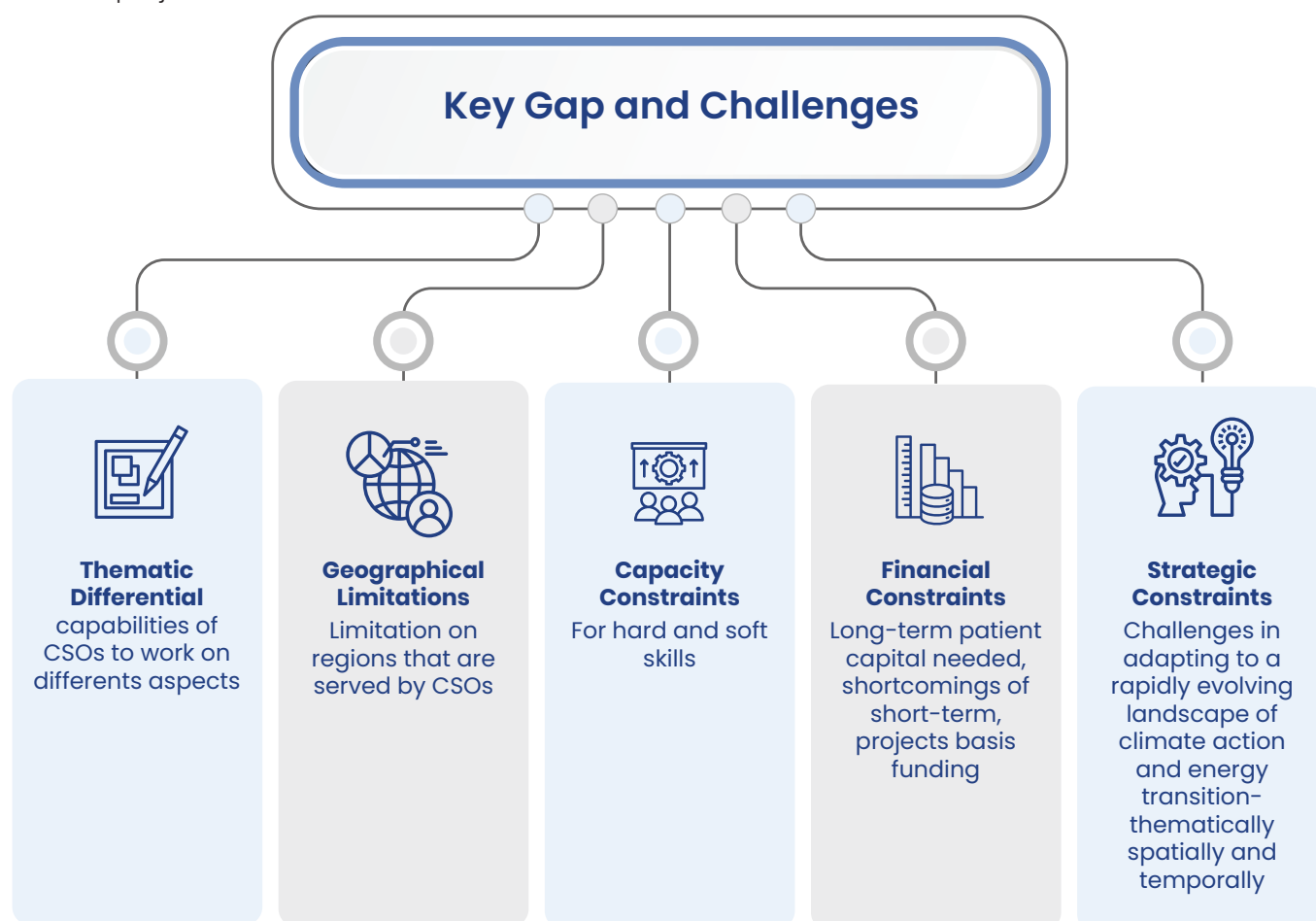


Figure 3: Gaps in CSOs working on Energy Transition in India (Source: Representation by Author)

Future Strategies

In order to highlight some of the existing pillars of CSO action in the space of energy transitions, along with areas for future action, we use literature review and findings from a closed-door discussion with a few relevant CSOs. From this assessment, the following four attributes of CSO action in energy transition space can be highlighted. (Also see Annexure 1)

Systems approach for scaling civil society action (thematically and geographically) – A systems approach looks at changing the status quo, addressing the root causes, and further unpacking newer dimensions and areas. Hence, as different participants in the closed-door discussion reiterated, the first step in this direction is to build on the knowledge and networks that already exist and avoid reproducing efforts which have already been undertaken in the past.

A pre-requisite for this would be to undertake a comprehensive review of what has been already been done by various sets of organisations and prioritise work for future action. A scoping assessment highlighting the broader themes will be instrumental before devising future work programmes in the space of civil society action for furthering energy transitions in India. As one CSO representative highlighted, such a work programme could include vulnerability and need-assessment, building on existing research (academic and policy), along with traditional and indigenous knowledge, synergising emerging efforts with existing socio-political institutions, agencies and actors in the domain of developmental work and/or climate action, amongst others.

Building a network of change – Core to systems change is collaboration, where different kind of organisations come together to achieve shared goals and leverage each other's capacities (in this case – towards an equitable and fair energy transition).

- ▶ **Building bridges by connecting grassroots with policy** – The unique positioning and capabilities of grassroot organisations in collecting grounded data, forging network of social actors, bringing voices of marginalised communities, etc. can be used to complement the work of policy CSOs working from state capitals and metropolitan cities primarily.
- ▶ **Learning from International Examples**– There is a need for creating CSO platforms to exchange common knowledge, resources and technology and perspectives. We see many examples globally, for instance– the African Centre for Economic Transformation created a **Small Holder Voices portal** where farmers and other disadvantaged groups along with academia and policymakers, share case studies and initiatives to promote informed agriculture policy dialogue. This approach yield innovation in policy design and at the same time, caters to farmers voices and interests in different areas across the agricultural value chain. Recently, the largest civil society network for climate action in Philippines – Aksyon Klima Pilipinashas (AKP) initiated its new flagship initiative on the **National Convening of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)** on Just Energy Transition (JET). This is a first of its kind in the Philippines that will serve as a platform for civil society and social groups (i.e, women, indigenous peoples, farmers) to develop common positions and calls to governments, businesses, and other relevant stakeholders in sectors of economic focus (i.e energy, labour, transport) on advancing just and equitable energy transition practices.
- ▶ **Creating and leveraging platforms for effective advocacy** – Creating opportunities and relevant platforms for CSOs to engage with other CSOs, policymakers and regulatory bodies is essential for driving systemic change. More recently, in the energy and climate sector, we see platforms such as the GHG platform, Energy Transition Preparedness Initiative, Energy Transition Platforms, where three or more not for profit organisations have collaborated to establish mechanisms for open communication and joint action, thus facilitating meaningful discourse on climate action. Another example is the State Advisory Committees (SAC) administered by the State Electricity Regulatory Commissions. The SACs provide a valuable platform for CSOs to engage with

policymakers and inform transparent and fair electricity governance. Similar institutional arrangements requiring CSO participation in governance and regulatory matters of the state exist, for instance, in ministries of food safety and consumer affairs. Such examples highlight the need to ramp up efforts and opportunities for future civil society engagement in policymaking and for funding agencies to streamline their work strategies in the development sector.

Co-creating projects and solutions – Another important lever for furthering energy transition efforts by civil society actors includes adopting a participatory lens in planning, devising, implementing and monitoring project ideas and proposals. In what can be termed as ‘co-creation’, such a strategy can enable transparency of ideation and thinking as CSOs work with communities whose problems they intend to address, in devising projects. This makes communities active partners instead of mere recipients and bystanders, when it comes to policy or action-oriented projects undertaken by CSOs.

In the space of energy transition, for instance, this would imply CSOs engaging with the energy sector stakeholders they work with, and co-designing project proposals. Such co-creation strategies can be undertaken across regions and sectors including resource-rich areas, forestry, renewable energy development sites, urban cityscapes, mobility sector and other important sites for energy transitions. While this strategy intends to place people at the center of civil society action, active collaborations with other actors (as explained above) will also be indispensable to shape and inform future policy and practice in the space of energy transitions – including state and non-state, private corporate and financial actors.

Supporting internal capacity development – Long term project grants with a component of internal capacity building of grassroots-level CSOs can yield satisfactory results in furthering efforts of such organisations. Investing in developing capabilities regarding data collection, scraping and analysis, networking and finance capabilities, policy-aligned research (quantitative and qualitative) and event management can be some of the strategies going forward.

For instance, research from Kenya suggests that to promote climate action by CSOs, it is important to understand and invest in different interconnected roles that CSOs play including research, monitoring, service provision, advocacy and public accountability. The research further suggests that CSOs are active players interacting with multiple other actors, including international donors, government and amongst other CSOs themselves. Such linkages need more focus and investments as they help shape opinions, policies and practice, as also suggested by research in Sri Lanka-based CSOs working on climate change.

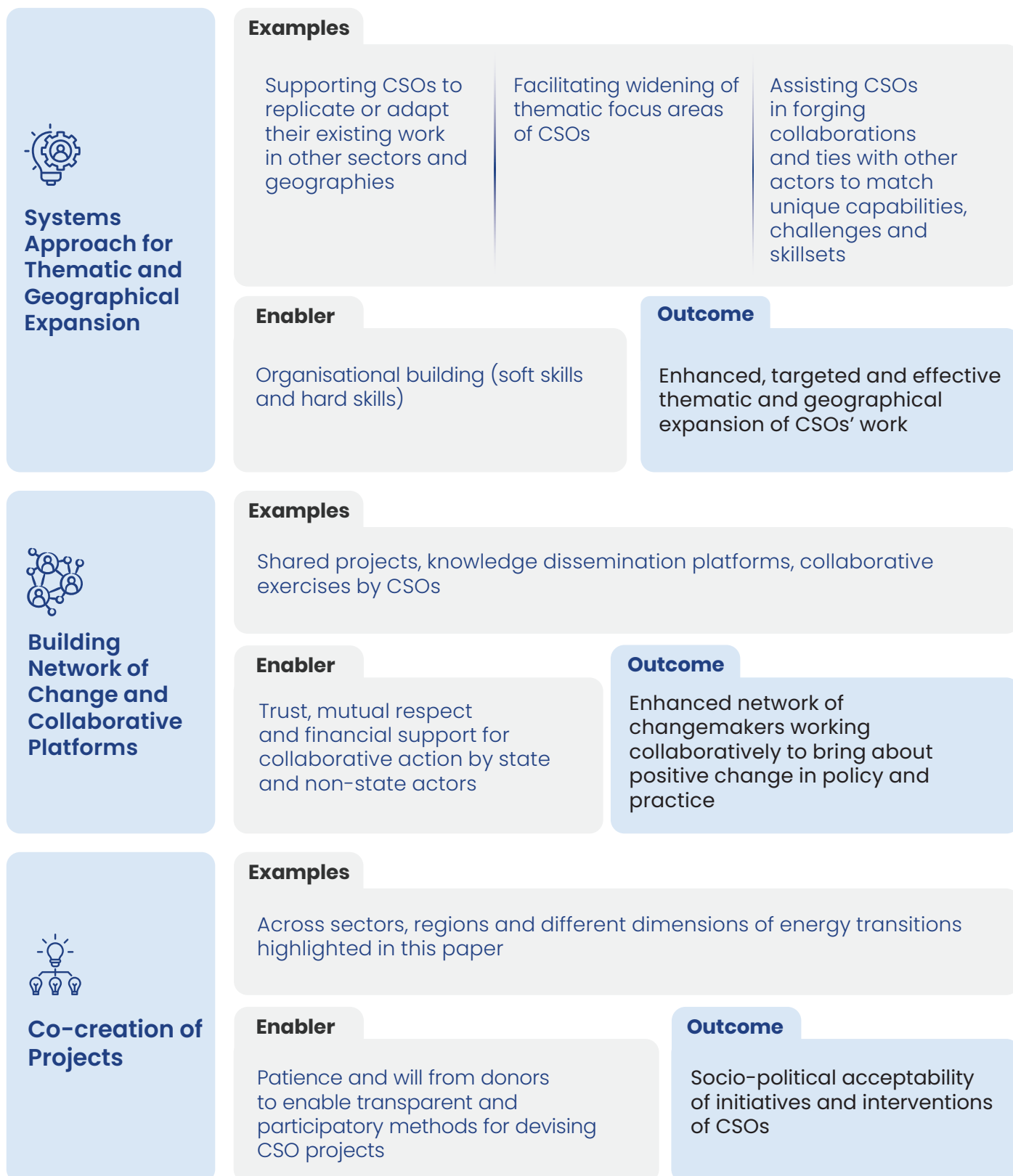
Deploying new and innovative strategies – As examples from countries like Bangladesh and Kenya highlight, investing in new and innovative civil society strategies such as outreach campaigns, storytelling through multimedia and exploring potential of different art forms (including music, poetry, street plays or even stand-up comedy routines) can enable a vibrant and effective civil society strategy in persuading and sensitising masses towards issues of public interest, including uptake of clean energy.

Examples exist, for instance the case of La Via Campesina South Asia, a farmer’s organisation that was a newcomer to climate change politics, organised a colorful climate caravan through Bangladesh to educate local communities about the effects of climate change on their livelihoods. Similarly, CSO-driven collaboration in working with gram panchayats, municipal corporations, trade unions and other socially rooted state and non-state actors can also be another model of CSOs’ operations that can be actively funded by philanthropic institutions and CSR funds working on energy transition related issues.

Exploring newer models for funding grassroots organisations – Long-term funding is crucial for implementing transformative projects and achieving lasting impact. Shorter and accelerated projects can act as a precursor to identifying future streams of longer-term work, thus maintaining a longer-term strategic alignment between different projects undertaken by CSOs. Thus, the need for CSO funding mechanisms to approach work programmes of such actors through a lens of patient capital that can inform long-term transformative changes stands out as a key recommendation.

Summary and Way Forward

To conclude, the findings from desk-based research and a roundtable interaction with a few CSOs working in energy transition space in India can be summarised in the form of an action-enabler-outcome matrix for potential funding agencies.





Internal Capacity Development

Examples

Supporting research-based, networking, branding and other core competencies of CSOs

Funding organisational development strategies in secondary functions of CSOs including human resources, outreach and communication, information technology, monitoring and evaluation, and others

Supporting public presence and reach of CSOs and their work through convenings, workshops and trainings

Enabler

Training workshops, targeted organisational building strategies

Workshops, trainings and collaborative convenings for grassroots CSOs

Outcome

Enhanced internal capacities of CSOs to undertake a variety of tasks



New and Innovative Strategies (of CSOs)

Examples

Encouraging CSOs to take up out-of-the-box strategies for promoting energy transitions (like public campaigns, stand-up comedy events, music and other art forms)

Facilitating collaborative works of CSOs with new actors which have been outside the purview of conventional policy-based programs including gram panchayats, social movement groups, media collectives, and other grassroots level collectives

Enabler

Support from local government agencies and regulatory bodies
Capacity building initiatives

Outcome

Greater acknowledgement of different types of tasks that CSOs can help facilitate or undertake
Better collaborative networks amongst CSOs and between CSOs and other actors working on energy transition issues in India



Models for funding grassroots CSOs (Long-term vs short-term projects)

Examples

Asset Pooling Models

Funding collaborative projects with a group of CSOs and/or CSOs with other state and non-state actors

Enabler

Support from market-based actors, different types of funding agencies and market regulators

Support from state governments and different types of funding agencies

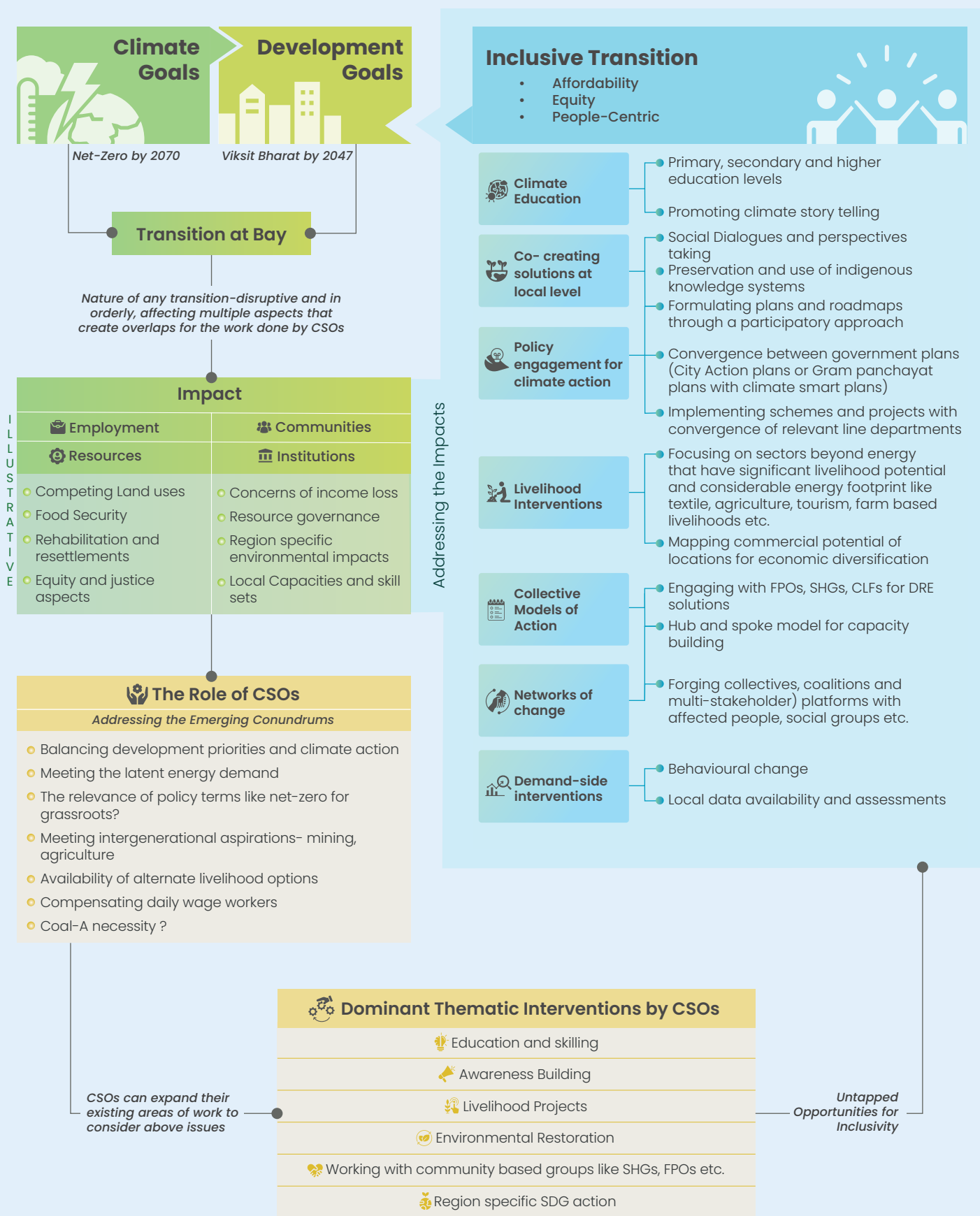
Outcome

Increased amount to be disbursed amongst CSOs for working on energy transition

Enhanced willingness of corporate donors to support CSOs beyond the conventional CSR mechanism

Table 2: Action-Enabler-Outcome Matrix

Annexure 1: Role of CSOs for an Inclusive Transition



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