

# Promoting the Power of Peaceful Relationships

Cord

Cord's Impact in 2021



# Letter from the CEO



**Set against a backdrop of ongoing challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, 2021 was a year punctuated by the emergence of significant conflicts that have shaped the world in which we live. The Global Peace Index reported a reduction in global peacefulness in 2021, marking the ninth reduction over the past thirteen years.**

In January we saw riots on Capitol Hill in the US that challenged the health of democracies globally, in February there was a military coup in Myanmar that triggered a conflict which has cost the lives of many innocent people and undone much of the progress made over the past decade. In August we watched as the Taliban took back control of Afghanistan bringing an end to many of the freedoms that Afghans have become used to in recent years. These conflicts played out on our TV screens and on all forms of media; 24-7 news programmes covered much of the events and we were inundated with information.

It can be so easy for this to be the only lens through which we view the world, increasing conflict, feeling less safe, destruction and devastation wherever we look. Whilst for many who live in areas affected by conflict this will indeed be all they see, for many of us the reality is much more nuanced.

At Cord this past year we have been challenged to look at things through a lens of hope. In the midst of challenge and conflict we have chosen to seek out hope amidst the stories of change and transformation that we have seen through our work. There is much happening in the world around us that we should celebrate and promote. In doing this simple act our perspective is shaped and we gain a renewed sense of hope for what lies ahead.

Amidst the shock and devastation of the military coup in Myanmar, we were inspired by the incredible examples of the Myanmar people who used non-violence to resist the military: their creative actions included nightly pot-banging to signify their discontent, hanging women's laundry across the roads to stop the military advancing, doctors and teachers refusing to work and boycotting of military companies. These actions continue to challenge and thwart the aims of the Myanmar military and powerfully demonstrate the role that non-violence can play.



These individual stories of hope inspire, encourage & energise us all to keep pursuing Cord's vision. They remind us that change is possible, that there is another way to make change happen and that it is not through the path of violence.

Maintaining hope throughout the pandemic has been essential in helping staff, partners and communities to remain positive and navigate the challenges they face. In 2021 we have continued to adapt our programmes to respond to the changing environment. One example is Cord's regional programme in South-East Asia, which brings Human Rights Defenders together from different contexts to learn from each other, build solidarity, invest in hope and explore new ways forward together. As international travel and large gatherings have not been possible we have utilised digital technologies to meet together and created video documentaries that convey the day to day realities of the lives of Human Rights Defenders to share with people in different locations.

Despite the challenges, in 2021 Cord commenced new programmes in Bangladesh and Thailand and initial work was developed in Uganda. In Bangladesh and Uganda we have developed new partnerships and co-designed innovative pilot projects to apply our peacebuilding methodology in different contexts, and we are hopeful that we'll see changes in communities and the programmes will develop and grow in the coming years.

As the gaze of the world begins to move beyond the pandemic, there has been much talk of 'building back better' and seizing the opportunity to reset some of the previous ways that kept people in poverty and prevented them accessing their rights. However, there are unfortunately already signs that this opportunity is not being taken. Many of the structural inequalities previously seen are now being re-established and the world is going back to the status quo.

At Cord we will continue to use the lens of hope to shape our perspective. We will continue to look for areas of positive change and promote them and we will work with communities to support them to access their rights and live in greater freedom.

In peace,



**Andy Pask**  
Chief Executive Officer



# Cord's achievements in 2021



**2,628** people trained through 126 training events on topics such as peacebuilding approaches, non-violent communication, leadership and management skills



**329** Human Rights Defenders supported to strengthen their advocacy work



**121** Civil Society Organisations strengthened through coaching



**100,039** lives impacted

## Burundi

- ▶ Vocational, business and entrepreneurial skills training improved the socio-economic resilience of youth
- ▶ Enhanced trust and tolerance built between community members from different social, political and ethnic backgrounds
- ▶ Less violent conflict between young people in project areas compared to other locations
- ▶ Young people participated in decision-making meetings with authorities at local levels
- ▶ Women took on local authority positions, conflict resolution and advocacy campaigns
- ▶ Increase in community members seeking out support of trained mediators to resolve conflicts
- ▶ Trained mediators provided individual and group psychotherapy to those affected by trauma

## About Cord

Cord is an international NGO working with people in highly sensitive and oppressive contexts to transform dysfunctional relationships into those that create peaceful and inclusive societies.

Cord works alongside partners in South-East Asia and the Great Lakes Region of Africa to deliver rights-based programmes which support communities, local organisations and human rights defenders to build constructive relationships with those in power and realise their human rights.

## Myanmar

- ▶ Training on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) provided to partner organisations to improve knowledge and skills on how to strategise and implement interventions
- ▶ Partners trained on approaches to sensitivity to understand how non-violent communication can be applied to sensitive conversations on religious freedom

## Laos

- ▶ Government, local civil society representatives, and human rights defenders trained on strategic planning, project management and participatory needs assessments
- ▶ Tailored coaching and training provided to local civil society organisations to better respond to the needs of communities
- ▶ Joint civil society and government projects improved the nutrition and education prospects of ethnic minority communities
- ▶ Two Village Forest Committees (VFCs) registered for the first time in Khong District, Champasak province starting the journey towards the official recognition of the community members' rights to participate in decision-making on natural resource management

## Cambodia & Vietnam

- ▶ Human rights defenders are more confident to navigate legal land rights frameworks and do effective advocacy
- ▶ Indigenous People trained on community land rights increased their understanding of registration processes and accessed their rights
- ▶ Human rights defenders are now using technology safely and effectively
- ▶ Extractive Industry and Social and Environmental Impact (EISEI) network meetings discussed the impact of the extractive industry on local communities
- ▶ Two land conflicts resolved through Communities of Practice and Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues bringing together different stakeholders

# Cord's three-strand approach

We continue to implement Cord's global three strand approach as part of our 'Promoting the Power of Peaceful Relationships' strategy. Despite the challenges of the year, in 2021 we made great progress towards our strategy.



## Strand 1

We enable local organisations and community representatives to become more resilient to the pressures they face and to develop constructive relationships with key powerholders



- ▶ 359 Self Help Groups operational with 6,953 members running 770 businesses in Burundi
- ▶ 280 Human Rights Defenders supported financially to continue their activism across Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam
- ▶ 120 community organisations supported in developing strategic plans to improve their resilience and sustainability
- ▶ 290 Human Rights Defenders connected through digital platforms and learning from the practices of others

## Strand 2

We work with governments and other powerholders to build their commitment to mutually beneficial relationships with grassroots organisations



- ▶ 270 Local Authorities attended events hosted by Civil Society Organisations, strengthening relationships, and exposing authority officials to the positive contributions of civil society
- ▶ Civil Society Organisations were invited by Local Authorities to attend 12 meetings and events
- ▶ 90 Civil Society Organisations and Human Rights Defenders were invited to take part and contribute to policy-level discussions
- ▶ 204 community representatives have been supported to take part in discussions on adherence to land laws, access to education and good governance


## Strand 3

We create space for relationships to develop and grow between local organisations, community representatives, governments and other powerholders



Creating meaningful spaces where trust and confidence can be built between powerholders and local organisations and communities continues to be a core area of Cord's strategy. Over the course of the year, 50 spaces were created as places to connect, collaborate and resolve issues. Some of these were in person and some were held online. These spaces took the form of Communities of Practice (CoPs) in Vietnam and Laos, working jointly on Indigenous People's land rights issues; multi-stakeholder dialogues with multinational businesses on environmental impact assessments for communities in Cambodia; civil society network meetings engaging provincial authorities in Laos; and dialogue sessions, narrative theatre sessions and celebrations of international days in Burundi.

- ▶ **We created 50 enabling spaces for constructive interaction**
  - ▷ 17 Thematic events and workshops
  - ▷ 19 Multi-stakeholder dialogues
  - ▷ 14 Sharing events

A woman with dark hair, wearing a bright blue polo shirt and tan trousers, stands in a lush green field. She is reaching up with her right hand to touch a plant with long, drooping green leaves. The background is filled with dense green foliage and a stone wall is visible in the distance.

## **Empowered women and young people demonstrate what they can achieve when given the opportunity**

Cord's global theory of how change happens identifies that in order for there to be meaningful and constructive changes within communities, that are felt by the most marginalised, the individuals and organisations that represent them must have the skills, confidence and space to raise their concerns, offer their suggestions and build a different structure for discussion and decision making.

The following stories of change illustrate how women and young people – who often struggle to be taken seriously in community dialogue – have been challenging stereotypes and reshaping the traditional expectations placed on them for the benefit of wider society.

## Women are breaking down stereotypes to become leaders

Syreda\* in the village of Pouy commune, Cambodia, felt empowered and confident to challenge stereotypes around the role of women in community forestry management and became the first female deputy leader of the local Community Forest Committee (CFC), setting an example for others to break down cultural barriers, pursue their passions and ensure their voices are heard.

In Cambodia it is common to hear only men speak out about forests and natural resource management (NRM), because for generations forestry institutions have denied women a voice in decision-making, despite their extensive knowledge of the landscapes they live in and depend on.

While people in Cambodia are increasingly recognising the role of women in biodiversity conservation and climate change adaptation, the proportion of women in leadership and decision-making positions is still very low.

In most cases, women find it hard to have a space to express their views about sensitive village issues, especially in the presence of outsiders, because they feel self-conscious and under-prepared. However, if women are not included in assessing and managing resources, they risk losing their livelihoods, and with the social, cultural and legal barriers they face, they have fewer options to find alternatives, compared with men.

Facilitated by a coalition of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the Ministry of Environment (MoE) has recently recognised this problem and developed a gender mainstreaming strategy, focused on promoting women leaders in NRM and encouraging men to ensure their greater participation.

Cord's SPIRIT project has a focus on women's empowerment and organised trainings with Community Forest Committees (CFC) which created a safe environment for female participants, who were particularly encouraged to speak, take part in role play and benefit from individual coaching. The project paid special attention to Indigenous women, most of whom have limited formal education and have not been able to take advantage of other training opportunities. The trainings motivated them and gave them the confidence to participate in discussions and decision making on the management of the forest.

In one village of Pouy commune, Rattanakiri, a young woman called Syreda who had begun to come out of herself and flourish through the training programme decided to put herself forward in the elections for the deputy leader position on the local CFC. Having seen her active involvement, ability and passion for community forestry, both male and female members of the community elected her to the position. This was a huge achievement for her as an individual and for women in the community who now have a role model to look up to, who is breaking down stereotypes and barriers to women's equal participation.

Her position on the CFC has inspired other women to get involved in community forestry, and the forest patrols have seen an uptick in the number of female members, where men have typically dominated. Their greater involvement also points to a change in the perceptions of men, husbands, and fathers, who within the traditional culture must give their approval for female family members to take part in such activities. In fact, it has been observed that village men now recognise the importance of including women in decision-making and the positive contribution they can make to the conservation of the forest.

\*Names have been changed to protect people's identity.



## Young people leading the pursuit of peace

Young people in Burundi have been challenging the negative perception that society has towards them by starting up their own, spontaneous initiatives to promote social cohesion within their communities, integrating what they have learnt in Cord's trainings on conflict resolution and non-violent communication.

Since its independence in 1962, Burundi has been plagued by tension with its roots in ethnic division between the usually-dominant Tutsi minority and the Hutu majority. As it has struggled to emerge from a 12-year civil war, during which hundreds of thousands were killed or forcibly displaced, Burundi has become divided at the community level: between groups who have often both perpetrated violence and been a victim to it. In such a context, aggravated by a lack of income opportunities and hope for the future, disenfranchised young people, especially men, are vulnerable to manipulation and coercion into participation in civil unrest and violence.

Cord's programme has provided young people with trainings in conflict resolution and non-violent communication techniques to help mitigate the risk of them being manipulated into violence or recruited into militias or gangs. Cord has found, through the Building Bridges in Burundi (BBB) programme, that empowering men to take on a peacebuilding role is also proving to be an effective means of changing negative gender-based perceptions: from men as the perpetrators of violence to actors who can be trusted as peacemakers in society.

Young people involved in Self-Help Groups have been spontaneously carrying out voluntary work within their communities, undertaking activities such as improving the commune roads and bridges. Others have been involved in organising community events and sports matches.

In Mpingakayove Commune, Rutana Province, young people selflessly chose to use their profits from the Self-Help Groups to support an elderly couple in need of a home, by purchasing bricks and providing manpower for the construction. Moreover, they reached out to the Communal Administrator for support in accessing other building materials. In the same commune, young people spontaneously mobilised and collaborated with the Colline Chief to obtain two and a half hectares of land from the Communal Administrator to have a communal area to cultivate cassava and get together to discuss community issues. These groups of young people decided to give back to the community and commit to its development; through their actions the societal perception of who young men are and what they do, is changing.

# Standing in solidarity with civil society in Myanmar

In 2021 the hopes of democracy for millions across Myanmar were crushed as military tanks rolled down the streets, silencing legitimate protest with violence.

For the country's fledgling civil society, the space within which to operate has severely contracted. Bans on gatherings and travel, violence, intimidation and disappearances of human rights defenders, alongside frequent internet and power outages are just some of the challenges that have plagued this period. At the same time, civil society organisations are facing tremendous obstacles in terms of the safety of their staff and a lack of financial resources to continue their work.

Cord's work in Myanmar in recent years has focused on building up civil society organisations to be the bridge between the community and powerholders when it comes to religious tolerance and ending discrimination on the basis of religion or belief.

At the end of the first phase of the programme the partners involved were eager to learn more. However, in the period between one project finishing and the next beginning, the military coup took place, resulting in a fundamental shift in the focus of civil society organisations, and for many posed an existential threat.

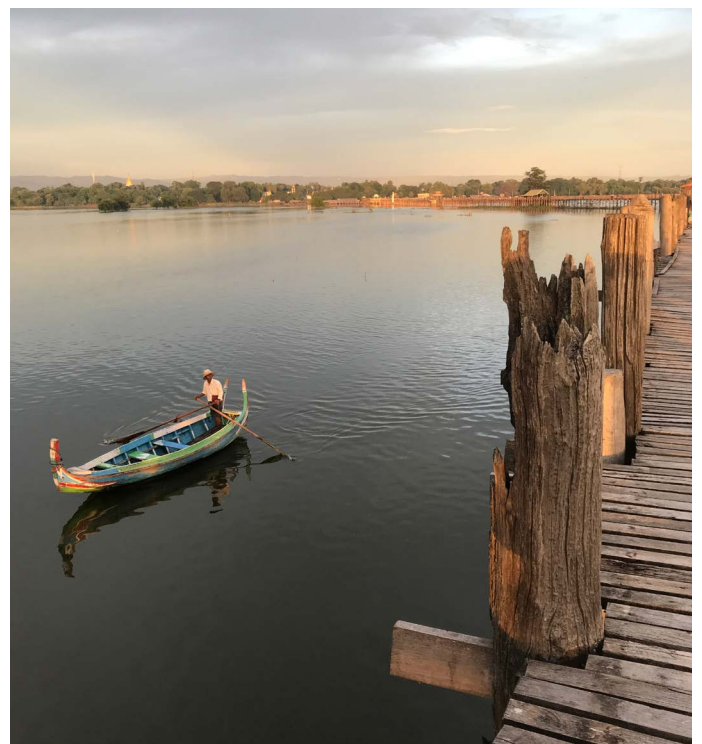
Decades of conflict in Myanmar along ethnic and religious lines has created a climate of distrust and intolerance towards minority groups. Cord sees civil society as having a critical role to play in countering the prevailing narrative and supporting a transition towards a more egalitarian society. Within the current crisis, this distrust continues to negatively impact efforts to form a coordinated anti-coup movement, particularly around issues of future interethnic power sharing. Meanwhile, the military have increased propaganda efforts to present themselves as guardians of Buddhism and stoke Islamophobia. Within this context Cord assessed that it remained pertinent to continue working with civil society to build their capacity to operate safely and increase their knowledge and tolerance for other religions.

Over this period Cord recognised the need to demonstrate solidarity with civil society organisations that wanted to continue their work while their leaders were arrested or forced to flee. Cord has been consistent, flexible and understanding of the evolving context when talking to partners throughout the last year and has adapted its partner training to include provisions for safety assessments, digital security and leadership skills.

Trust was universally eroded in the aftermath of the coup and the partners were initially reluctant to take part in the second phase. In order to rebuild this trust, Cord used encrypted communication channels with options to automatically delete messages, which turned out to be a winning strategy as partners were soon willing to talk openly about the situation and their struggles.

Moreover, Cord gave partners a safe space to network without fear. Activities were moved online so they did not have to meet face to face; they could use pseudonyms and not turn on their cameras. The partners noticed and appreciated the importance that Cord placed on their safety, and the sensitivity with which delicate topics were approached, creating a sense of security.

The fruits of these efforts are now beginning to show with the partners actively participating in discussions, building relationships between themselves and other actors working on religious freedom, and even meeting outside of the project activities. Cord linked the partners to an online network which wrote and presented a report on Freedom of Religion or Belief to the UN Special Envoy. Moreover, partners now show excitement to proceed with the next steps of the project to advocate for and promote religious freedom in Myanmar.



## Opportunities for collaboration emerged between powerholders and civil society

Building trust takes sustained commitment over time and even then, can be fragile: trust can be broken in a moment, and take years to restore. Cord creates opportunities for civil society and powerholders to work together, believing that regular, constructive, mutually beneficial interactions will break down barriers and prejudices over time, laying the foundation for trust. As the following stories highlight, the trust that is building between these groups is leading to more and more opportunities to work together, and deeper engagement beyond the expectations of individual projects.



## Human Right Defenders and Local Authorities work together for the prosperity of the community

Local authorities have started actively seeking out the expertise of human rights defenders to support them in resolving community issues thanks to the relationships they have built through Cord's peacebuilding activities. Through the SPIRIT project, representatives have been meeting together in safe spaces to exchange different points of view and break down misconceptions and biases held about each other.

In Cambodia, a culture of obedience to authority has traditionally limited the confidence of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) to collaborate with powerholders, but they recognise its value. At the same time, local authorities tend to undervalue the skills and abilities of HRDs. As a result, HRDs are isolated and left out of discussions on government policies related to the forests from which they make their livelihoods and are trying to protect, while local authorities routinely fail to meet their obligations towards communities.

HRDs who have been involved in Cord's SPIRIT project are managing to counter this trend and are deeply involved in community discussions: they attend meetings with local authorities and confidently raise issues and ask questions, not only on forest management and the environment, but increasingly on wider issues that affect their communities, such as healthcare and preventing violence against women. They have also been actively involved in discussions around commune development plans, influencing decision makers to consider and prioritise projects that benefit the most marginalised members of the community.

Community members in one village shared that the attitude of their Community Protected Area leader has markedly improved; he is now able to relate to authorities in a non-confrontational way, is a better leader and inspires villagers to take part in forest patrols.


These changes have come about through the HRDs' participation in Cord's training and coaching on peacebuilding approaches, community mobilisation and constructive dialogue, and through the opportunities created by Cord for HRDs and local authorities to form Communities of Practice where they come together to share experiences and make joint plans to resolve community issues.

The discussions are going beyond superficial participation, with signs that trust and respect are being built. The authorities are now actively requesting that HRDs participate in every meeting related to commune issues because they can see that the HRDs have an attitude of collaboration rather than confrontation. Moreover, the authorities recognise the expertise that HRDs have on the community's problems, and that they need to work to give control to communities when it comes to the practices and policies that affect their lives.

Through these changes the voices of community members are now being heard and sensitive issues are being constructively discussed and resolved.



## Local authorities show trust in young people and their power to promote peace

A photograph showing three individuals—two young men and one woman—pulling a large, dark fishing net from a body of water. The net is filled with many small, silvery fish. The man on the left is wearing a brown long-sleeved shirt and is looking down at the net. The woman in the center is wearing an orange t-shirt with the word 'antique' on it and a headwrap, and she is also looking down. The man on the right is wearing a blue t-shirt with the word 'WOLVES' on it and is looking down at the net. The background is a calm body of water with some ripples.

Local authorities in a particularly conflict-affected commune in Burundi have seen the change in young people taking part in Cord's projects and recognised their potential to promote peace. They have since been engaging them to take part in campaigns in neighbouring communes to share their stories and inspire others to choose peace over violence.



Protracted conflict in Burundi along ethnic lines has led to a fragmented society. At community levels, lack of trust and tolerance among neighbours from different ethnic and political backgrounds increases the likelihood of relatively minor disputes escalating into conflict. In Mubimbi commune, Bujumbura Province, where there is a high number of people who support the opposition party, the level of mistrust runs especially deep with frequent outbreaks of violence.

It is within this particularly challenging environment that there has been a remarkable change among young people. Through Cord's projects they have been trained and coached in leadership, Ubuntu values, non-violent communication and conflict management and have demonstrated what they've learnt through community volunteering initiatives and taking a leading role in resolving community tensions. Younger members of the community with different political backgrounds, have come to the fore as the key promoters of social cohesion; and have become increasingly viewed within their communities as role models for peace.

These changes have been noticed beyond the project stakeholders and are even breaking down stereotyped views held by government representatives. Local authorities recognised the contribution of young people to building peace in Mubimbi and approached them to

support with running sensitisation campaigns in four nearby communes. Furthermore, local authorities are now inviting young people to share their concerns and bring community issues to their attention as they see the value in their representation.

This demonstrates a significant shift in the attitude of the local authorities who were initially sceptical about the project having any impact at all, as they couldn't see how young people, commonly perceived as aggravators of violence, could take on such a role.

**Ubuntu means 'humanity', but is used to confer the meaning of togetherness, recognising that our actions have an impact on others. It is sometimes translated, 'I am what I am because of who we all are'.**



**Closer  
collaboration  
between civil  
society and  
powerholders  
leads to real  
change for  
communities**

The ultimate aim in Cord's theory of change is to see tangible, relevant, life-improving changes being experienced by members of poverty-affected and marginalised communities. Through this we aim to see societies flourishing, with each member being respected and their needs being met. Each change in policy, or practice, designed collectively between grassroots organisations and powerholders, is a building block towards achieving this goal. The following story shows how the efforts to strengthen cooperation between these groups are leading to real change for some of the most marginalised groups in society and deeper engagement beyond the expectations of individual projects.

## Marginalised groups are represented in policy discussions

Cord's work in Laos facilitated the connection between the Lao Disabled People's Association in Oudomxay (LDPA-ODX) and local authorities, who recognised the organisation's capacity to bring positive change to the challenges faced by people with disabilities. The authorities are now consulting with them on issues of education for disabled children and the creation of jobs for people with disabilities.

It is estimated that over 160,000 people in Laos are living with a disability. The proportion is higher in rural areas where injuries caused by explosive remnants of war and low health and immunisation standards are common. As in many countries, disabled people face huge barriers to equal participation in society and access to education and employment opportunities. Uneven roads and the mountainous topography of the country present challenges to mobility, while social attitudes cast those with disabilities as a burden to their families who are unable to contribute to society.

The Lao Disabled People's Association in Oudomxay (LDPA-ODX), established in 2006 and run by individuals who themselves have disabilities, was set up to improve the lives of disabled people and their recognition and participation in society. Up until the start of Cord's project in 2018 the association was known among the people, but not by the local authorities; they did not have strong organisational management capacity and had minimal grant funding, thus limiting their reach and potency.

Meanwhile, in 2018 the government finally adopted a decree to protect the rights of people with disabilities, that had been years in the making. The decree explicitly defines what qualifies as discrimination and what reasonable accommodations should be made to improve access to public spaces.

Cord's CONNECT project strengthened the organisational capacity of LDPA-ODX, whilst creating spaces for them to showcase their expertise and technical knowledge to a wider audience. Under the project LDPA-ODX chaired regular community meetings, with coaching support from the Learning for Development Association, one of the partners on the CONNECT project. The meetings welcomed other community-based organisations, local organisations, international NGOs, government representatives and UN bodies to raise, exchange and discuss issues together.

Through these meetings LDPA-ODX made connections with local authorities who recognised their valuable contribution to community development. These local authorities have since invited LDPA-ODX to consult on the issue of education for disabled children, and job creation for people with disabilities. It is very unusual for a local organisation in Laos to be given such a channel to consult on policymaking. This example demonstrates that the local authorities have developed a high degree of trust and respect towards the knowledge and insights of LDPA-ODX, and a recognition that they have a particular expertise around the needs of disabled people.

When the government recognises and gives a position like this to a local civil society organisation it allows them to work together on resolving issues, which in turn, increases the likelihood that problems will be solved in a way that is both sustainable and effective for the affected communities.



# Cord's Theory of Change

IF Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are supported to become **more resilient** to the pressures of their environment

+

CSOs have **greater resources** and stronger **analytical, communication** and **advocacy** skills

+

CSOs are aware of their own **prejudices** about and the **challenges** and **opportunities** of working with powerholders

IF powerholders are exposed to the **benefits of engaging** with civil society.

+

Powerholders have **stronger analysis, communication** and **consulting** skills

+

Powerholders are aware of their own **prejudices** about and **challenges** and **opportunities** of working with CSOs

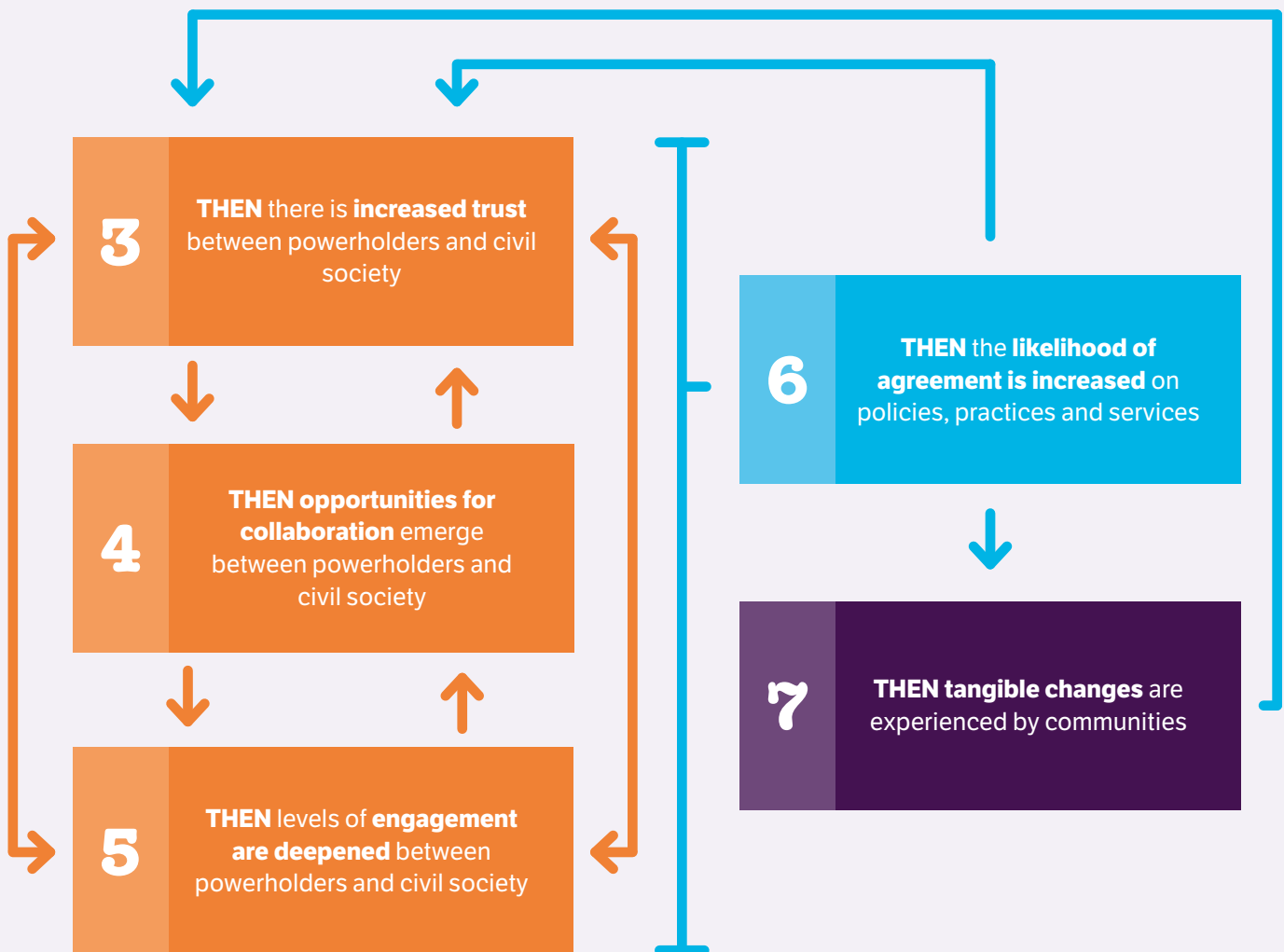
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**THEN** CSOs are more **willing, confident** and **capable of engaging** with powerholders

**AND IF opportunities to engage** are created and/or supported

2

**THEN** powerholders are **more willing, confident** and **capable** of engaging with CSOs



## Our vision & mission

Cord's vision is of a world where all people live in the fullness of peace; having the freedom to flourish and live free from fear. Our mission is to transform dysfunctional relationships between individuals and communities and those holding power into positive and thriving relationships built on mutual dependency and trust.

Cord's vision is a world where peace is fully realised. We work to be an effective partner for peace in Africa and Asia by working in societies affected by violent conflict and poverty, developing the capacity of partners to build sustainable peace.

