Vision for the future of International Cooperation



© FOTOWONDERS

PARTOS Samen Werkt.

Opportunities for International Cooperation

Opportunities, resources and power are unevenly distributed across the world. The geopolitical situation is changing rapidly, and the number of serious crises is rising. For decades, people and organisations have been working towards a fairer distribution, using international cooperation as a tool. That tool takes many forms. It has achieved a great deal: lower child mortality, fewer people living in extreme poverty. Yet poverty and inequality have not been overcome. That is why many organisations are asking themselves: how can we strengthen our contribution to structural change, alongside alleviating immediate distress?

Partners in the Global South want a greater say. Even within international NGOs, the desire to put these organisations at the wheel is growing ever stronger. This offers opportunities for equal collaboration.

However, Partos believes that simply adjusting the way we work is not enough. The current and future global situation calls for a different way of thinking, organising and working together. Within the sector, we are already seeing innovative practices and a growing willingness for critical self-reflection. What works? What are we letting go of? What will take its place? Innovation succeeds when the sector embraces it together with donors and partners, guided by a clear vision.

At its core lies locally led development. Stakeholders in partner countries are not recipients of aid, but co-investors in a shared world. They contribute knowledge, resources, networks and leadership. This means they have a say in decisions regarding funding, choices and what constitutes success. In this way, localisation takes on a new perspective.

Partos and its members are working with partners and donors towards a shared vision. The contours are becoming clear. On the one hand, there is an approach rooted in compassion and solidarity, focused on international (emergency) aid. On the other hand, there is an approach rooted in systemic change and the prevention of exploitation and oppression, focused on international cooperation based on justice. In the current geopolitical reality, both approaches are necessary and can also co-exist within the same organisation or programme, depending on the context.

What both approaches must have in common is a different way of working: locally led, no longer dictated by actors from the global North, and always based on international law. These lines of thought form the starting point for the analysis and recommendations set out in this publication.

Eight recommendations from the Partos network

Partos and its members believe we are currently in a fundamental systemic transition. Geopolitical shifts in power, climate change, technological developments, rising economic inequality and

growing pressure on gender equality and democratic freedoms are changing not only international relations, but also the way in which societies develop and how countries cooperate with one another.

This transition calls for a reassessment of the role of international cooperation as part of an integrated foreign policy. The central question here is not only how development cooperation should adapt to a changing world, but also what contribution international cooperation can make to shaping the global transitions necessary to tackle shared challenges. In times of uncertainty, there is an obvious temptation to increasingly use international cooperation advance national security, economic competitiveness or migration control. Whilst this is understandable, it is ultimately insufficient. After all, the major issues of our time cannot be resolved within national borders and call for joint solutions, shared responsibility and long-term cooperation.

That is why development cooperation must be regarded as an instrument that invests in global public goods, democratic resilience, a strong international legal order, equal partnership and sustainable development. A future-proof Dutch foreign policy combines values and interests. International cooperation, based on human rights, international law, solidarity and reciprocity, is not only normatively desirable. It is also a strategic investment in peace, security, economic stability and sustainable development. It is precisely in a more fragmented world that the Netherlands can make a meaningful contribution by investing in cooperation that looks beyond short-term interests and contributes to a stable international environment.

Based on this analysis, Partos presents eight guiding recommendations for future Dutch BHOS policy.



© FOTOWONDERS

1. Global challenges call for more international cooperation, not less

Interdependence between countries is increasing. Climate change, loss of biodiversity, conflicts, migration, pandemics and economic shocks do not respect national borders. International cooperation is therefore not a cost to be minimised or a residual category within foreign policy, but an investment in global public goods and shared security.

A future-proof Dutch foreign policy recognises that sustainable development, stability and prosperity can only be achieved by strengthening international cooperation. This requires a long-term

perspective in which the Netherlands not only responds to crises, but also invests in preventing them and in strengthening the resilience of societies.



© ZOA – Lieuwe Siebe de Jong

2. Human rights and the international legal order must remain our guiding principles

Particularly in a world where geopolitical power balances are shifting and international cooperation is increasingly viewed in transactional terms, it is important to remain committed to the values that have shaped international cooperation since the Second World War.

Respect for human rights, the international legal order, the democratic rule of law and the right to self-determination are not luxuries that apply only in times of stability. It is precisely during periods of transition that they offer direction, legitimacy and protection to citizens and societies. This means that human rights, gender equality, climate justice and the position of marginalised groups should not be regarded as separate policy issues, but as guiding principles that permeate the entire foreign policy. They form the basis for sustainable development, inclusive decision-making and peaceful societies.

3. The transitions of our time call for new coalitions

The complex challenges of our time cannot be solved by governments alone. Sustainable change arises from cooperation between governments, civil society organisations, trade unions, research institutions, businesses and local communities.

It is precisely during periods of systemic transition that broad societal coalitions are of great importance. New solutions often emerge at the intersection of different perspectives and sectors. Civil society organisations play a crucial role in this by picking up on signals in society at an early stage, connecting different parties and creating space for experimentation and innovation.

The Netherlands can strengthen its international position by actively investing in such broad coalitions, in which each partner contributes to social change from their own perspective.

4. Partnerships based on equality must be the new starting point

In a multipolar world, there is no place for development cooperation in which knowledge, funding and decision-making are organised primarily from the global North. Effective cooperation

requires shared ownership, mutual trust and recognition of local knowledge, experience and leadership.

Local partners must be involved not only in the implementation of programmes, but also in policy development, the allocation of resources and joint accountability for results. This also requires Dutch organisations, donors and institutions to continually reassess their own roles. Equality does not mean that every partner has the same position or responsibility, but it does mean that decision-making, knowledge and influence are distributed more fairly. Only in this way can international cooperation be established that is in line with the changing global balance of power.



© Max Foundation

5. Policy coherence is a prerequisite for credible international policy

Ultimately, the effectiveness of international cooperation is determined not only by BHOS policy, but also by the coherence of government policy as a whole. Trade, investment, climate, agriculture, migration, tax and security policies can reinforce development goals, but they can also undermine them. In a world where issues are becoming increasingly intertwined, policy coherence is not a technical issue, but a strategic necessity. The Netherlands can only be credible on the international stage if it links different policy areas and makes choices that serve both national and global interests.

6. Resilient societies require strong institutions

Sustainable development does not arise solely from projects or investments, but because societies have strong institutions that enable social change. This means investing in democratic institutions based on the rule of law, independent research organisations, a free press and well-functioning public services. Within this broader institutional landscape, civil society organisations and trade unions deserve particular attention. It is precisely these organisations that are increasingly under pressure worldwide due to shrinking civic space, restrictions on fundamental freedoms, mounting political pressure and declining funding.

At the same time, they are indispensable for protecting human rights, strengthening democratic participation, representing workers and marginalised groups, promoting social dialogue and holding governments and businesses to account. Moreover, in periods of transition, it is often civil society organisations that drive social innovation and build bridges between government, the market and society.

This requires long-term, flexible and accessible funding that enables organisations to strengthen their institutional capacity and operate independently. There must also be explicit scope for influencing policy, advocating for interests and strengthening public support, both in the Netherlands and Europe as well as in partner countries. Protecting and strengthening civil society is therefore not a sector-specific choice, but an investment in democratic resilience and sustainable development.

7. Invest systematically in global citizenship as the basis for public support

Future-proof international cooperation requires not only strong policies and institutions, but also engaged societies. Global issues are having an increasingly direct impact on the daily lives of people in the Netherlands. Climate change, migration, international inequality, pandemics and economic interdependence demonstrate that local and global developments are becoming ever more closely linked.

Global citizenship helps people to understand this interconnectedness and offers practical ways to contribute to a just and sustainable world. This involves not only knowledge of global issues, but also the development of engagement, critical thinking, solidarity and the ability to seek solutions together with others.



© Chiara Beltramini – Liliane Foundation

Civil society organisations play a key role in this. They link international developments to the experiences of people in the Netherlands, create space for dialogue and debate, and highlight how global challenges and local issues are interconnected. In doing so, they contribute to public support for international cooperation and to its democratic legitimacy.

At a time when development cooperation is increasingly under scrutiny, the Dutch BHOS policy must therefore structurally provide scope and resources for global citizenship. This requires a long-term commitment in collaboration with civil society organisations, educational institutions, and youth and diaspora organisations. Only through such a broad, sustainable approach can an open and

engaged society emerge that continues to support international cooperation.

8. Strengthen the EU's position as a reliable and credible partner

In a multipolar world, a united European Union is a key geopolitical player. Combating poverty worldwide is an explicit treaty obligation, and it must remain so. A united EU carries geopolitical weight; bilateral cooperation must complement this. In practical terms, this means that, when it comes to international cooperation, innovation and development are the responsibility of Member States such as the Netherlands, after which the EU ensures economies of scale.

To ensure that the EU can be a reliable and, above all, credible partner in 2030 and beyond, investments are needed that are transparent regarding the geopolitical agenda. Brussels and the national capitals must be able to hold their own in a changing world, and development cooperation is a crucial part of this. This applies provided that a genuine impact on sustainable development is guaranteed.

In conclusion

The systemic transition the world is undergoing does not call for a reduced role for international cooperation, but for a different one. International cooperation should not focus primarily on funding projects or solving isolated problems, but on strengthening the capacity of societies to shape sustainable change themselves. This calls for international cooperation based on reciprocity, equality and shared responsibility, which invests in the institutions, partnerships and social forces needed to ensure that transitions proceed in a just and sustainable manner.

It is precisely here that the future strength of Dutch international cooperation lies. Not by choosing between values or interests, but by linking the two and working towards a broad social movement for international cooperation. In this way, the Netherlands can remain a credible and relevant international partner, even in a world undergoing fundamental change.