

Partos recommendation new policy scheme

Strengthening Civil Society

October 2023

This document summarises the input Partos had received from its members after a consultation in June 2023. This consultation process aims to provide input to the Dutch MFA -and advocate for a more conducive 2026-2030 policy framework.

The Policy Framework for Strengthening Civil Society (2021-2025) is the fourth in a series of Dutch policies to support civil society in the South. This Policy Framework was developed in 2019, and the policy implementation started in 2021. The Strategic Partnerships (SP) under the Strengthening Civil Society (SCS) policy framework are now halfway through their implementation period. Partos has started a consultation process amongst its members to develop recommendations for the successor of the current policy framework, based on the experiences and insights so far. The new framework is expected to be published by the end of 2024 and implemented from 2026.

What elements do you appreciate in the current Strategic Partnerships (SP) and should thus be maintained in the next policy framework?

General

- The idea that supporting CSOs is a goal and a means in itself.
- Recognition that the voice of civil society matters, especially in times of shrinking civic space. Donors like BuZa must keep stressing the importance of this role.
- Cooperation between organisations and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- That the partnership is about more than just a funding relationship between MFA and its partners. It allows for (critical) dialogue.
- Focus on advocacy and capacity strengthening.
- Recognition that Policy and Advocacy undertaken by Civil Society needs to be supported by donors (including funding for work in Europe to engage with MFA and EU). There is no 'business case' for this kind of support from an economic point of view, but there is a business case for this from a developmental point.
- Multi-annual trajectories with large investments, leading to impact.
- Follow-up on experiences of former partnership, continuity and improvement.
- 5-year funding framework: this is a minimum if we want to bring about social change and work within complex settings.

Shift the Power

- Southern organisations in the lead / southern leadership/ focus on localisation.
- Increased focus on local solutions and people-centred design of interventions.

Thematic Focus

- Diversity in themes.
- Civic Space.

- The focus of the content of call was good, explicit and innovative. Focusing on structural change through the strengthening of civil society.
- Focus on SRGR and human rights. The Dutch government is an important supporter, as other donors stay away from themes such as HIV/AIDS, Human Rights, Sexual Health, LHBT, etc.
- The explicit attention to inclusion and marginalised groups was very important. It has stimulated partnerships to take into account disability in their proposals.

Flexibility

- Multi-country programs.
- There is an overarching purpose and focus. At the same time, there is flexibility to change and adapt to changing circumstances.
- flexibility in reporting on donor indicators.
- Focus on a robust Theory of Change and the flexibility that it brings.
- Connection with EU and AU strategies.
- The flexibility of MFA to design our own PMEL framework and evaluation processes.

M&E (and learning)

- The fact that the ministry regularly organised joint learning or input sessions for all SPs related to PMEL or other key issues in the programming.

Which elements would you like to see different in the next SPs? What could be better, different, stronger (or completely gone) in the next policy framework?

General

- Cooperation should be extended to other embassies and other ministries (Justice, Climate, Finance) as well.
- More focus on (and time for) long-term processes such as building NGO/CSO constituency - so that CSOs obtain greater legitimacy.
- Not only maintaining the focus on inclusion in the policy framework but also explicitly including it in indicators for measuring results and impact.
- Stimulate partnerships to allow southern self-representative organisations of marginalised groups to take more leading roles within consortia (including sufficient space and budget for capacity support/ organisation building).

Shift the Power

- Extend the shift of power.
- Providing more funding for organisational development and capacity for southern organisations so they can fully play their role. Provide money to southern organisations during the conception phase so they can fully participate from the start. Improve the balance between service provision and advocacy in synergy.

- Create room to take risks and try out new approaches. And there is room to actively listen to what organisations from the Global South need: not only to achieve the program objectives but also to be able to grow as a civil society.

Countries

- (Extreme) poverty is not only a problem in poor countries, but also in middle-income countries. Make sure strategic partnerships can work there as well.
- A stronger focus on a regional approach to countries within 1 alliance will allow stronger exchange of capacity, learning, networks and impact. It will also facilitate stronger exchange and alignment between the different SPs.
- The role of the embassies and the capacity they have to be partners to the SPs needs to be strengthened. Especially on sensitive issues or in countries where the structures of civil society are still in development, this role can become more central and in partnership.
- More freedom to decide in which regions the SP wants to be implemented. For example, 30% of partnerships 'freely' and 70% mandatory in a country with a development cooperation relationship. A region such as Eastern Europe (outside EU member states) also has its challenges; our type of organisations can make a difference there by lobbying.

Thematic focus

- Within the current framework, the chapter on innovation addresses digitalisation. In a next SPs framework, the role of digitalisation and digital media should be integrated throughout the whole framework. This is crucial for a strengthened civil society and safe civic space and needs to be part of the narrative (and not only seen as innovation).
- Human rights should be defined broader than what happens now. It should also include a good-functioning rule of law that also protects poor people.

Flexibility

- Less 'MFA steer' on thematic areas for partnerships - so that partners have more leeway to decide what themes in which countries they assess as most valuable for L&A interactions with government and opening civic space.
- Less emphasis on country focus; although understandable in relation to the government's priorities, a too strict focus might limit organisations to make the most out of their programme.
- Diversify geographical selection and give more decision-making power to organisations in the implementing region, based on issue prevalence, support required/needs, and existing local networks and resources. Create space for linking different issues.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)

- We would like more joint learning agendas to strengthen common programming methodologies based on individual learning agendas in SPs. There also might be room for more strategic alignment between SPs, joint development of knowledge products, joint research/evidence collection to feed advocacy work, etc.

Finance and Compliance

- That investments can be made in the structural growth of civil society: that means more organisational funding and flexible funding.
- A lot of time and capacity is lost in building the organisational structure and management procedures. Insist on existing relations with a proven track record. Have a closer look at existing networks.
- Have a longer timeframe, lighter M&E requirements, more focus on downward accountability (towards communities/beneficiaries), and more dialogue (at least consultation) with SPs before design, like how to do reporting, baseline-MTR by MFA.
- Discrepancy between shifting the power and strong compliance, need for more flexibility in funding mechanisms. Excessive compliance is hindering southern leadership.
- Changes in the audit protocol during the period of the contract. Lesser focus on the focus-countries of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs to avoid that there are 25 partnerships in one country. Now, this leads to a heavy workload for embassies, difficulty in aligning, the risk of doing double work and overburdening the same partners.
- As compliance continues to grow, risk appetite seems to be going down. This creates a lot of administration, control and less room for innovation and execution of the work.
- More focus on learning/adaptability than accountability and control (balance is now lost).
- Too detailed budgets, particularly on the indirect support costs and budgeting templates that are inclusive of Dutch financial norms and practices, but are not in line with budgeting practices in other countries. We recommend adopting similar templates to the EU to streamline financial management practices for SPs and local partners.
- IATI as a requirement (it was a nice idea but is hardly used in practice and takes a lot of time).
- Accountability criteria and reporting pressure is very high, and a lot of time is spent on reporting. More trust in partners would also be beneficial, especially for southern leadership and meaningful youth participation. The audit protocol is difficult to work with and should be released when the grant framework is released, not after. The 15% max for ICR is very difficult to work with for small organisations.
- Especially for smaller, grassroots and youth-led organisations, more flexibility in funding is essential, including for overhead costs, as it is needed for organisational sustainability. This would also enable working with more diverse and marginalised groups.

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