



Recommendations for a more power-balanced and effective policy framework strengthening civil society



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Inhoud

Inhoud.....	2
Background Partos Shift-the-Power Lab 2.0	3
Introduction	4
The policy framework: Relevance and shortfalls	5
1. From agenda and priority setting dominated by the North to ‘Starting from the South’..	6
Opportunity.....	7
Recommendations	8
2. From avoiding and transferring risks to sharing risks	11
Opportunity.....	12
Recommendations	12
2. From an accountability mechanism that triggers client-contractor relationships to a mechanism that supports equal partner relationships.....	13
Opportunity.....	14
Recommendation.....	14
3. From unilateral decision-making to joint decision-making on issues related to monitoring, evaluation and learning.....	15
Opportunity.....	16
Recommendations	16

Background Partos Shift-the-Power Lab 2.0


Partos is the membership body for Dutch-based organisations working in development cooperation. The Partos Innovation Hub is a space where development professionals can learn, interact, experiment, and focus on innovation and collaboration to navigate the future and accelerate change.

For multiple years the Partos Innovation Hub has actively supported the 'shift the power' movement pushing for more equal power relationships within development cooperation. In the 'Shift the Power Lab 2.0' more than 150 development professionals are working in 6 working groups on 6 practical solutions for achieving more balanced power relations in international partnerships for development

In May 2022, at the launch of the Partos Innovation Lab 2.0, a working group was established with the task to develop policy recommendations for a more power balanced and effective Dutch policy framework strengthening civil society. This task was referred to as Action 1 of the Partos-Shift-the-Power Lab. The focus of the working group has been on making recommendations for the successor of the current policy framework strengthening civil society, which is expected to be launched in 2025. The working group is composed of: Paul van den Berg, Koos de Bruijn, Heinz Greijn, Mirjam Krijnen (until end of 2022), Esther Meester, Marijke Priester and Bart Romijn (until end of 2022).

This paper is inspired by the learnings from the Partos [Dream paper](#) and the Partos [Strategic Partnership Lab learning sessions](#). Whereas the Dream paper addressed a very broad spectrum of factors that are at the root of imbalanced power relations in development cooperation, this discussion paper focuses specifically on the factors related to the policy that are within the span of control of the Ministry. This paper does not address other non-policy-related factors that CSOs need to change themselves. These changes are explored by other working groups that are part of the Partos Shift-the-Power Lab 2.0.

On 29 March 2023, the workgroup presented the draft recommendations in an online workshop. The valuable feedback received from many participants has been included in this paper. On 26 September 2023, Partos launched [Voices on Power](#), a complementary report to highlight Voices from the Global South in relation to a new policy framework. The report comprises in-depth interviews with representatives of Global South organisations participating in the strategic partnerships under the current Dutch policy framework.

The interviewees point out that the importance of the framework is beyond dispute: *'The Ministry has been a groundbreaking funder in enabling the strategic partnerships and rightly earns a lot of credit for this. Looking at the next Policy Framework, the Ministry can be a champion again.'* In the interviews, many of the recommendations of the policy paper are affirmed. However, most importantly, they bring additional, sharp insights reflecting Global Southern contexts. These insights are 'worth a good conversation', as phrased in the concluding chapter of 'Voices on Power', which all interviewees endorsed. The main 'light bulb' moments  raised in the chapter are included in this policy paper.

Introduction

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.¹ In May 2018, the Dutch Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation (FTDC) informed parliament how the government aims to respond to a set of international challenges and opportunities² in the interest of the Netherlands. In the policy document [Investing in Global Prospects: For the World, For the Netherlands](#), one of the many measures announced was the development of a policy framework for strengthening civil society, as a follow up to, and building on the experiences with the *Dialogue and Dissent Policy 2015-2020*. Support to CSOs is considered important as they can help to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality³. The SDGs are the international guiding principles for Dutch Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation policy. The current Policy Framework for Strengthening Civil Society was developed in 2019. The call for applications was published in December 2019, and the closing date for submitting applications was March 2020. Implementation of the policy started in 2021. The budget amounts to 1,29 billion euros for the period 2021-2025⁴.

This paper is a critical reflection on the Dutch Policy Framework for Strengthening Civil Society, focusing on two questions:

- Which are the mechanisms anchored in the policy that limit CSOs in the North and CSOs in the South in their efforts to achieve more balanced power relations?
- In which ways should the successor of this policy framework be different in order to create a more enabling environment for CSOs to achieve more balanced power relations?

The paper is based on the recognition that system change is needed at various levels and that the Dutch policy framework is only one of these levels. There are other non-policy-related factors that CSOs need to change themselves. These changes are explored by other working groups that are part of the Partos Shift-the-Power Lab 2.0. But as recent research⁵ has

¹ Earlier grant instruments focused on strengthening civil society in the South were: the co-financing systems (medefinancieringsstelsels) MFS1 (2007-2010) and MFS2 (2011-2015) followed by the Strategic Partnership Dialogue and Dissent (2016-2020).

² Including "growing conflict and instability, large flows of refugees and migrants, the continued existence of extreme poverty in developing countries, high levels of population growth in certain regions, climate change, inequality of opportunity, rapid technological developments and digitalisation, rising protectionism, steep international competition and a looming trade war." [Investing in Global Prospects: For the World, For the Netherlands](#)

³ In different ways:

- By implementing poverty reduction programmes, both in fragile states and in more stable environments. They play an important role because of their expertise, their innovations and their capacity to reach the most marginalised groups, including people with disabilities.
- By lobbying and influencing governments so that they take responsibility when it comes to implementing the SDGs in a sustainable and inclusive way. Strategic partnerships with civil society organisations improve the quality and effectiveness of policy. [Investing in Global Prospects: For the World, For the Netherlands](#)

⁴ Kamerbrief inzake Versterking Maatschappelijk Middenveld, 14 Juli 2021

⁵ Banks et al. 2024. Where do we go from here? Navigating power inequalities between development NGOs in the aid system. Global: Academics Researching Power Imbalances.

brought out, programme level changes within CSO programmes may address power, but do so in limited ways. A donor and partner like the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs is in the position to catalyse system-level changes.

The policy framework: Relevance and shortfalls

Strong, diverse, legitimate and capable civil society organizations (CSOs) are indispensable for making democracies work and for ensuring that change is people-centred and focused on contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals. Through civil society organizations, citizens connect on common interests, such as employment conditions, environment, human rights or the inclusion of marginalized groups. Through CSOs, citizens can organize themselves, influence decision makers in the public and private sector, and hold them accountable. For governments to be accountable and responsive, they need to be informed by clearly articulated peoples' demands for policy changes, legislation and services. Voicing such demands is a key role of CSOs.

In recent years, space for civil society has been shrinking in countries worldwide. In many countries CSOs are subject to delegitimation, human rights abuses, and imprisonment, reducing their ability to operate⁶. Crucial civic and democratic freedoms are being denied. The CIVICUS Monitor, which tracks civic space in 196 countries, states that only three per cent of the world's population lives in countries where the core civic freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression are widely respected, even though they are essential to the health and vitality of civil society.

Against this backdrop of shrinking space for civil society, the relevance of the Dutch Policy Framework for Strengthening Civil Society in the global South can hardly be overestimated. The policy enables Dutch CSOs and CSOs from the global South to join forces in their fight for a just, inclusive and sustainable world. At the same time, there is increasing awareness within the Ministry and among the CSOs, that this joining-forces is not as straightforward as it may seem. The decolonization debate and the international Shift the Power movement have shown that, just as in many other sectors, also the cooperation between CSOs from the global North and global South is affected by notions of colonial, racist thinking and unequal power relations. Power imbalances, between CSOs in the North and CSOs in the South, inhibit the Southern partners in their development and hold us back in achieving our common goal⁷: a just, inclusive and sustainable world. Dysfunctional power relations are not a phenomenon

⁶ [Safeguarding Peace, Shifting Priorities, Berlin Statement](#), Issued in context of CSPPS Annual Conference 2022 - 17-18 May, 2022

⁷ This is a widely shared observation. See also the [OECD DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance](#), which was adopted on 6 July 2021. It recommends that adherents ensure that local civil society actors are involved in decision-making based on equal power relations with supported civil society strategic alliances, networks, platforms and resource centers in the design, budgets, and implementation of their programming. See for a detailed power analysis of how this is experienced by Southern CSOs in the Dutch setting: Alhassan, Mohammed Awal and Marijke Priester *The journey to Southern leadership in programming*. In: Van Wessel M., Kontinen, T., Bawole, J.N. (eds.) (2023). *Reimagining civil society collaborations in development. Starting from the South*. Abingdon: Routledge.

that is limited to relations between CSOs in the North and CSOs in the South. We have learned that the problem extends to relations between actors in the entire system including the Ministry, Northern and Southern CSOs, community-based organisations, informal groups and communities. Because of this, the policy is less effective in strengthening civil society than it could have been ⁸. The relations and division of roles between the Ministry, Northern CSOs, Southern CSOs and CBOs need scrutiny.

⁸ 1. *'We can ask ourselves if a Call is the right instrument to come to a selection of programmes to strengthen civil society because competitiveness is leading. Applicants may be inclined to sing the song of the funder instead of focusing on issues asserted by the communities'....'We need relationships based on trust, not client-contractor relations; we need co-creation, not consultation; we need simple designs, not bureaucratized systems.'*

The policy calls for *"more control and ownership for civil society organisations"* as *"a major step towards establishing relationships on an equal footing and promoting the role of civil society"*. ⁸⁹ However, in the Partos Community of Practice Shift-the-Power, participants discovered that despite the many innovative elements and good intentions, the policy still falls short of creating an enabling environment for balanced power relations. These shortfalls are related to:

- Agenda and priority setting
- Managing risks
- Accountability
- Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

In this paper, we will elaborate on the room for improvement in these areas. Building on the work done in the Community of Practice Shift-the-Power in 2021¹⁰, a working group¹¹, composed of dedicated experts, has developed policy recommendations to better address issues related to power imbalances. Representatives of seventeen organisations provided feedback and contributed ideas.

1. From agenda and priority setting dominated by the North to 'Starting from the South'

In the current programming cycle, many of the important decisions have already been taken by the time Southern CSOs and CBOs are invited to contribute their ideas. Priorities and time frames have been determined by the Ministry. CSOs in the lead of proposal writing and consortium building have decided on the selection of partners. Lead parties are most often

⁸ The policy framework p.6

⁹ More donors call for shifting and sharing of power. The [Donor Statement on Supporting Locally Led Development](#) announced on December 13 2022 at the [Effective Development Cooperation Summit](#) in Geneva, Switzerland. was endorsed by 16 international donors including the Netherlands.

¹⁰ See [Dream paper](#) published in January 2022

¹¹ The working group is composed of: Paul van den Berg, Koos de Bruijn, Heinz Greijn, Mirjam Krijnen (until end of 2022) , Esther Meester, Marijke Priester en Bart Romijn (until end of 2022).

Dutch CSOs¹². Participation of Southern CSOs and CBOs in co-designing the interventions is furthermore limited because proposals have to be written in a very short time and without adequate resources for consultation.

Proposed programmes must fit the Dutch five-year policy cycle. Results have to be achieved in a relatively short period of implementation, followed by evaluation in the last year of the cycle. There is no provision to ensure protracted support to change processes that require long-term engagement. Funding is strictly limited to lobbying and advocacy whereas research¹³ suggests that combining L&A with other roles can put CSOs in a better position to influence decision makers and sustain the policies. This programming that is initiated from the North and wrapped in a tight Dutch timeframe, makes it very challenging to respond to local dynamics and needs that are very diverse, often difficult to predict and that require much more responsive and flexible approaches, building on what is already there.

Opportunity

It would be a huge step forward if the process could be designed in a way that partners adopt complementary roles in accordance with the subsidiarity principle. In this context, the subsidiarity principle should be applied as follows:

- In case it is the community level where most of the action is taken, and the impact is felt, the agenda and priorities set by communities should become the main reference point for shaping the programme. Actions should be designed in such a way that communities are in the lead and interventions build on their knowledge and resources.
- The same applies to interventions that impact mainly at the national level in the global South. In those cases, the priority and agenda setting by national CSOs in the South should become a main reference point. In such cases, Northern partners should adopt the role of supporters (not leaders) of locally-led agenda and priority setting 2. 3.
- When the intervention requires action in the global North, Northern CSOs are usually best equipped and positioned to take the lead in reaching out to decision-makers and the general public in their own countries.
- When the intervention requires action at the global level, agenda setting becomes a joint effort of Northern and Southern CSOs.

¹² The policy does not limit the role of lead party to Dutch CSOs but in practice, most strategic partnerships are led by Dutch CSOs. Even when a Southern based CSO is in the lead, the Dutch partner is more influential than most other partners. In the Dream Paper Shift-the Power (Partos, January 2022) it is explained why this is the case. Because Dutch CSOs maintain close relationships with the Ministry, they are usually better informed about when funding opportunities arise, about the type of procedures and criteria that will be used in the selection of programmes for funding. Because of this informational advantage and connections, Dutch NGOs are in a better position to acquire and maintain an influential role in partnerships. They are involved to various degrees in setting the parameters for new policy, drawing up new policies and rolling them out, and therefore are in a privileged position to make decisions that shape consortia. They are more likely to be the initiators of a partnership. Even when they are not the lead party, Dutch CSOs do have a vital role in developing the programme.

¹³ Marja Spierenburg et. Al. 2019: Civil society engagement with land rights advocacy in Kenya: What roles to play?

💡 2. *There has been a lack of clarity concerning the introduction of Southern leadership by the Ministry and the Dutch CSOs in the current partnership programmes. The Northern initiative to introduce this, is received as laudable, but in many cases preparedness of the Southern organisations was missing. The introduction seems a bit underestimated, is the impression. Vital elements to create space for Southern leadership, and gradual building and mentoring were and are not yet everywhere in place. Neither is it obvious in every partnership, if the concept of ‘shift the power’ is a lived reality for the Dutch CSOs.’*

💡 3. *The interviews learn that a thriving Southern-led collaboration depends on important conditions, such as:*

- *the composition of the consortium: a consortium in which there is only one Southern consortium partner is experienced as tokenistic.*
- *the process of partner selection: Southern CSOs should select their partners instead of being ‘dictated’ with whom to work.*
- *the budget division: despite increased participation at consortium level, the access to budgets for Southern CSOs, and the budget division between Southern and Dutch consortium members didn’t always keep pace. With the entrance at consortium level, additional roles and responsibilities are expected from Southern CSOs, on top of their implementing role, inherently implying an increase in Southern budgets.*
- *the decision-making structure beyond the consortium level: it is hard when Southern CSOs, fulfilling a role as country host, depend on decisions taken far away in the North, reaching the Southern CSOs only after several layers have been passed. (How) could the Ministry at this level oblige Northern CSOs to adhere to the principle of Southern leadership and a balanced power structure, given the multi-layered structures of Northern CSOs?*
- *the opportunity for investment in capacity strengthening to fulfil new roles is not always provided.*
- *some interviewees state that the lack of familiarity with Dutch CSOs’ backgrounds needs extra steps to reach a shared vision.’*


Recommendations


To ensure that policy does not only reflect the Dutch and international agendas and priorities, but it is also important to include a Southern perspective in the process of designing the policy and in the appraisal of proposals 💡 4.

💡 4. *‘It is not only the Global South that has a legitimate interest in setting the agenda. The reality is that Dutch funding implies a Dutch interest, as is underlined in other interviews. We should find ways to navigate in this context as Southern and Northern CSOs, and as the Ministry, considering the geopolitical and economic situation in Europe with growing right-wing leadership...and we should consider approaches to include Southern governments. They are important stakeholders when it comes to open up civil spaces and acknowledge the value of civil society. Alignment and involvement in national processes supports increased effectiveness and offers more opportunities to hold national and local governments responsible.’*

With a view to including the above-mentioned subsidiarity principle in the implementation stage of the policy, we refer to recent research and evaluations that have generated some interesting ideas and recommendations that can help to innovate programming approaches.

One set of recommendations¹⁴ is referred to as Starting-from-the-South. The idea is (1) to turn programming upside down, starting from the global South rather than the global North and (2) to think of Northern CSOs as part of relatively Southern-centred networks rather than as the leading organizations in linear North–South relations. The policy framework would have to encourage Northern CSOs to identify ongoing change processes pursued by Southern CSOs in a specific context to which they can make a meaningful contribution based on their own strengths at domestic and/or international levels. Collaboration can then be grounded in the acknowledgement of existing agendas, understandings, and self-defined support needs, as well as in an analysis of where these can be meaningfully engaged.

- To make programming starting from the South possible, there should be much more time and resources made available for partnership building and for thorough locally-led or locally-consulted intervention design processes¹⁵
- To increase room for consultations between partners during the process of writing applications, it is recommended to increase the time between launch of call for concept notes and submission deadline to six months.
- It is furthermore recommended to include a design and inception period of one year at the start of the implementation of the programme, during which partners can engage in consultation and in identifying needs, priorities, ideas and solutions among groups and communities that are involved in the action and that experience the impact of the interventions.
- In addition to sufficient time, it is critical that there is adequate funding for this design and inception phase.
- To ensure that consultations and the assessment of needs and priorities are conducted in a meaningful way, it is recommended that a thorough description of the consultative processes in the inception phase will be one of the important appraisal criteria¹⁶ in the selection of applications .

 5. This includes a more in-depth description and assessment of the collaborative arrangements. Currently it is for instance accepted if only one Southern CSO participates in the consortium (cf. Policy Framework p.11). And the framework does not require a vision on

¹⁴ Margit van Wessel et al: [Starting from the South: Advancing Southern leadership in civil society advocacy collaborations](#), Wageningen University and Research 2019. See also: Margit van Wessel et.al 2023: [Reimagining Civil Society Collaborations in Development: Starting from the South](#), Routledge

¹⁵ See also Banks et al. 2024. Where do we go from here? Navigating power inequalities between development NGOs in the aid system. Global: Academics Researching Power Imbalances.

¹⁶ A critical review of the qualitative check criteria in the current policy is needed. Currently, these criteria assume that extensive consultations have been conducted already and that needs and priorities are known, while in fact time and resources to conduct consultations are very limited in the current application process.


working within the consortium with Southern CSOs, comparable to a 'consortium vision on working with local organisations in the in the application proposed countries' (cf. Policy Framework p.18).

To do justice to the outcomes of these consultations, there should be recognition that social change is a long-term process, and that social change in the global South cannot be planned within the tight time frame of a Dutch policy cycle. Therefore, it is recommended to:

- Extend the programme period to 10 years.
- Design successive policies in a way that there is more continuity for interventions that focus on long-term change processes.

While we recognize that starting-from-the-south and upholding the subsidiarity principle is to a large extent, within the span of control of consortia themselves, the new policy framework could stimulate this even more by requiring proposals to elaborate on:

- Distribution and complementarity of roles and responsibilities of different actors, including Northern CSOs, Southern CSOs, CBOs, movements, trade unions etc.
- Legitimacy of actors that are involved in the programme (Do actors have a (local) constituency and/or other sources of legitimacy? How will the legitimacy of actors yet to be identified be assessed and included in the selection process?)
- How does the programme build on local resources, knowledge and networks?
- How do distribution and conditions of funding accommodate starting from the south?¹⁷

A second set of recommendations¹⁸ focuses on the complementarity of the various roles CSOs have in society. We support the focus on lobbying and advocacy in this policy framework¹⁹. But we also believe, that making a stronger connection with other roles CSOs have in society including service delivery, civic education and livelihood support, will give CSOs more opportunities to reach a higher impact, adding to their legitimacy and it will also add to do justice to the knowledge base of CSOs about the realities on the ground²⁰  6. It is recommended that the policy should forge stronger complementarity between the various

¹⁷ Banks et al. 2024 (p. 29-31) brought out funding as a key driver and priority area for addressing power inequalities in the aid system, and as one where action remains limited thus far within CSO programmes, indicating a need for system-level action.

¹⁸ Marja Spierenburg et. Al. 2019: Civil society engagement with land rights advocacy in Kenya: What roles to play?

¹⁹ "Service delivery activities are not eligible for grants under this instrument" (p.10 of the policy framework)

²⁰ There is also a risk connected to emphasizing the distinction between advocacy and the more development-oriented delivery of services. In an article published in the Journal of Development Studies, [Defending Civic Space: When are Campaigns against Repressive Laws Successful?](#) (Nic Cheeseman and Susan Dodsworth, 2022) the authors point at *a common tactic among governments seeking to constrain civil society is to divide-and-rule, arguing that the activities of 'bad' CSOs – that is, those with more explicitly political agendas – are a threat to the work of 'good' CSOs dedicated to the nation's development.* The authors arrive at the following conclusion and recommendation how to deal with this risk: *Unfortunately, there is no straightforward solution to this challenge. At the very least, however, domestic campaigners and international donors seeking to defend development from the closure of civic space should take care to explain how civil society contributes to development: it is not just by delivering services, but by holding governments accountable for their choices and amplifying the voices of marginalized communities.*

roles. For example, *some livelihood support can be provided by advocacy CSOs, while larger scale support can be coordinated with development-oriented CSOs with larger budgets, or through donors coordinating their service delivery funds with advocacy funds*²¹

Key in this approach is that service delivery serves the goal of the advocacy efforts and is not a stand-alone goal (see also Spierenburg et al). One possible way to achieve this is through flexibly combining SCS funds with other funding schemes.



6. *'The prioritisation of advocacy in the framework is widely supported, because 'advocacy means change', but the current Northern-defined straight-jacket insufficiently considers the volatile context in which advocates should be allowed to speak from credibility. They should be able to shift to complementary roles to prevent harm, even to save lives. And here the Ministry could be more visible as an ally.'*


2. From avoiding and transferring risks to sharing risks


Because decisions have to be taken about the allocation of large funds for a period of five years, the risks are considered high. In the current policy framework, the Ministry minimizes its risks through two types of measures:

- Threshold criteria - All consortium partners need to have a positively assessed Organisational Risk and Integrity Assessment (ORIA) which is used to assess the organisational capacity of an organisation in terms of legal status, organisational structure, governance, financial resources, financial and administrative management capacity, capacity to monitor and evaluate, and the capacity to generate reports in accordance with IATI (International Aid Transparency Initiative) standards.
- Transferring the risks to the lead party of the consortium - The terms and conditions concerning the grant have been laid down in a grant decision letter issued by the Ministry in which it is stipulated that the lead party of a consortium is accountable on behalf of all consortium partners. The consortium partners are expected to draw up a partnership agreement which stipulates how consortium partners will ensure that the lead party fulfils the obligations towards the Minister in respect of the grant.

The combination of these two measures has a very determining effect on the way power relations between the lead party and the other consortium partners, including Southern CSOs, evolve. Because the policy puts the burden of risk mainly on the shoulders of the lead party, transferring and avoiding risk tends to become the dominant risk management strategy in partnership building and implementing the programmes. When conducting capacity assessments as part of the partner selection process, lead parties put heavy emphasis on assessing the risks of engaging in a partnership with specific Southern CSOs and CBOs. This is often a one-way process of the lead parties, most often Dutch CSOs, in a more powerful role. Usually, it is Northern CSOs assessing Southern CSOs, rarely the other way around. This

²¹ Marja Spierenburg et. Al. 2019

is not conducive for building equitable partnerships. Furthermore, these eligibility criteria exclude less well-established CSOs, that nonetheless may be effective change agents²². A third disadvantage caused by this risk avoiding behaviour is, that it becomes very difficult to work in fragile, volatile and insecure environments where it is not possible to apply strict accountability protocols that have been designed in and for a Dutch context. This is a very serious limitation because it is in these environments where support to strengthen civil society is often needed most 7.

 7. *'One of the Southern leads observes that the risk management put on the shoulders of the lead easily influences the relationship with partners to become a contractual one, which is quite contradictory to the Ministry's intention of working on a more equal footing. Another observation from interviewees is that risk management is interpreted as managing financial risks: 'The people we work with are seen as a risk to lose money, but we need to take risks to stand up for the human rights of these people'. Risk management, in this perspective, is about concepts like solidarity and close communication.'*

Opportunity

More equal partnerships can be achieved by creating an environment in which actors are less inclined to transferring risks to other actors in the chain, or to avoiding working in areas where risk cannot be reduced to zero. Can we think of a policy that creates a more conducive atmosphere for actors to engage in risk sharing, which can be defined as *a reasonable sharing of the burden of preventative measures and reasonable sharing of the responsibility for materialising risks*²³?

We believe that the Ministry is well-positioned to become a pioneer among funders in developing innovative approaches in risks management²⁴.

Recommendations

Recently, the Ministry commissioned research into risk sharing in the humanitarian sector resulting in very valuable recommendations how to put risks sharing into practice²⁵. These recommendations also apply to policy framework for strengthening civil society. Furthermore, lessons can be drawn from the way the Ministry and Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA) shape their relationship. In these relationships, some of the recommendations of the above-mentioned study are already put into practice. The Ministry provides a multi-year block grant, country selection is up to DRA. The Ministry is at a distance, although there are frequent

²² Cf. Banks et al. 2024. Where do we go from here? Navigating power inequalities between development NGOs in the aid system. Global: Academics Researching Power Imbalances.

²³ [Risk Sharing in practice: success stories, enablers, and barriers to risk sharing in the humanitarian sector | IASC \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](#). This study by Ed Hughes published in June 2022 was commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and ICRC.

²⁴ More donors are trying to find ways to deal with risk. Reference is made to a policy brief by Cynthia Smith and Jenna Thoretz [Understanding the 2022 USAID Risk Appetite Statement](#), Humentum, October 2022.

²⁵ Ed Hughes, June 2022

strategic consultations in which sharing of risks is on the agenda. There is little bureaucracy, also prompted by the fact that this is humanitarian aid, which has to take place quickly.

It is furthermore recommended that there is more room for dialogue between the Ministry and the strategic partners about risk sharing. Dialogue about risks is needed during implementation of the current policy framework, and as part of the design and implementation of the new policy framework.

One issue that needs to be addressed in the policy is the procedure that will be followed if the composition of a partnership changes after the grant decisions have been taken and the strategic partnerships have been signed. This can happen for example if one of the partners drops out of the partnership, for whatever reason. In the current policy, the consortium is expected to submit a new proposal and to go again through the entire application process. Since the start of the current policy, several lead parties had to go through such a time consuming and costly exercise. This is a heavy premium that strategic partners have to pay for changes in the composition of the consortium. It will make them more risk averse in the next round.

3. From an accountability mechanism that triggers client-contractor relationships to a mechanism that supports equal partner relationships

In the case of the Policy Framework SCS, the Ministry expects the lead party of a consortium to be accountable on behalf of all consortium partners. The audit protocol, which has to comply with Dutch accounting regulations and which was published only after the tender, forces lead parties to sign annual agreements with their partners in which it is stipulated that the lead party decides the allocation of resources, and that the agreement can be terminated by the lead party immediately at any moment in time. Without signing such annual agreements, the lead party must take on the entire subsidy for five years in one year in its financial accounts.

In fact, the financial accountability mechanism of the policy framework triggers the involvement of a power structure consisting of a cascade of contractor-client-relationships, in which the contractors have to account for their performance and spending of funds to the clients. This contradicts the power structure promoted in section 2.3 C of the policy framework encouraging partnerships in which *local organisations have ownership and control*, and in which *decision-making on goals, responsibilities, implementation, funding and distribution of resources is a joint responsibility, shared equally by every organisation in the partnership*.

A second problematic aspect of the financial accountability mechanism is its complexity. The budget model, and the reporting and accountability requirements are very time consuming and very difficult to comply with, also for Dutch organisations. The system is unworkable for Southern partners, most of whom have funding relationships with multiple donors, each with their own audit protocols. What made things worse in the current framework, was the

introduction of a revised audit protocol half-way through the programme period, with the expectation that the revised version would be implemented retroactively. Strengthening capacity and mobilizing resources to meet financial accountability requirements, disproportionately drains resources at the expense of resources that can be used for the primary process.

The effect of this combination of:

1. mainly Dutch organisations being financially accountable to the Ministry, and
2. an accountability mechanism that is extremely difficult to comply with for all consortium partners, puts the relationships between Dutch and Southern CSOs under stress.

Furthermore, the framework only provides guidelines for accountability towards the donor. To enhance equal partnerships and Southern ownership, the consortia and their partners should adopt other forms of accountability, including mutual accountability and accountability towards their constituencies.

Opportunity

The evolvement of more equal partner relations can be supported by a (financial) accountability mechanism²⁶ that it is:

- Aligned with what is stated in section 2.3 C of the policy framework about local ownership, control, and equal power relations.
- Workable for lead parties, other consortium partners and accountants.
- Supporting accountability to the people, groups and communities concerned by the actions of the consortia and their partners.

Recommendation

It is recommended to develop the accountability mechanism way before the start of the tender process to ensure that it is simpler to work with and that the provisions are in line with the objectives of the policy framework.

Furthermore, it is recommended to explore how horizontal or downward accountability can be stimulated by the framework and whether such forms of accountability can decrease requirements for upward accountability.

²⁶ Including also accountability mechanisms between the GS CSOs and the groups/communities they work with and accountability mechanisms between GN CSOs and GS CSOs.

4. From unilateral decision-making to joint decision-making on issues related to monitoring, evaluation and learning

In the current policy framework, it is acknowledged that regarding power relations in partnerships, the question of who has a say in monitoring and evaluation is an important one²⁷. However, in the policy this question is limited to the relations between Dutch and other partners in the consortium, and between consortium partners and local partners outside the consortium. The policy framework is unclear regarding the power relations in decision-making concerning M&E between the Ministry and the consortia. The role of the Ministry is described in rather vague terms. It is stated that in a strategic partnership the Ministry has a role in *Facilitating of monitoring (including field visits), learning and evaluation (internal and external)*²⁸. The question of how the role of facilitator is filled in in practice remains unanswered.

In the implementation stage of the Power of Voices program we see that the Ministry tends to adopt the role of a client in a client-contractor relationship. Without much consultation with the consortium partners, the Ministry acts rather top-down and prescriptive in:

- Determining the types of methods to be used or not to be used.
- Determining the type of quality criteria to be used.
- Initiating external studies and commissioning them to evaluators, some of whom also come with a top-down attitude.
- Determining, regarding the learning agenda, a 3.5-year programme 'Power of Learning' in seven selected countries.
- Prioritising accountability at the expense of other M&E objectives, including learning and steering.
- Dedicating funds for M&E without defining a clear process, like funds to Embassies for third-party monitoring.

The Ministry's forward-leaning approach to the role of a facilitator of M&E has led to decisions that are problematic for various reasons:

- Outcome harvesting is discouraged, although this method is, for very good reasons, the method of choice of many consortia, and although this method does generate relevant data for learning and adaptation of programmes.

²⁷ Page 6 of policy framework: Power relationships play a role at various levels and in various ways. They exist in the consortia,12 between the consortia and local partners and between the local partners themselves. Within a consortium, power relationships are related to who takes decisions, who receives and manages funding, who plans programmes, and who is involved in formulating a programme and deciding what form participation takes. The allocation of tasks and responsibilities between the Dutch and other partners in the consortium is significant. Power relationships also play a role in how partners work together with local partners outside the consortium. The question here is what role these partners play and how much say they have in designing, implementing, monitoring, evaluating and where necessary adapting the programme.

²⁸ Page 8 of the policy framework.

- Methods that generate data (in particular quantifiable data) that fit the basket indicators and that can be fed into IATI are encouraged, although these data are mainly used for upward accountability and are of very limited value for learning, for steering of programmes or for horizontal and downward accountability²⁹.
- Partners are forced to invest in parallel track M&E systems with one track for generating data for the purpose of upward accountability, and another track generating data that are needed for learning and steering the programme.
- Because of the combination of the above, the PMEL workload is excessively high.
- Studies are initiated unilaterally at a stage that programmes have barely reached implementation stage, especially in the most insecure and volatile environments.
- Studies are conducted by third parties who do not all embrace and live up to the principles of Southern ownership and bottom-up approaches, reinforcing top-down relations and mechanisms.

Opportunity

More equal power relations in the strategic partnerships can be achieved by changing the way decisions on monitoring, evaluation and learning are made. Decisions should be based on a sound dialogue after which partners co-decide.

Recommendations

In the policy it should be stated explicitly that decisions about monitoring, evaluation and learning should be joint decisions in which the Ministry and the consortia have an equal say.

The policy should include clear guidelines for joint decision-making between the Ministry and consortia on monitoring and evaluation, ensuring that:

- All M&E objectives are being met, including accountability, learning and steering³⁰.
- The time, effort and costs invested in generating data is proportionate to the use value of these data.

To conclude, it is important to note that the current [IOB Evaluation Quality Criteria](#) cause a bias towards interventions that tend to focus on what can be measured, which can be at the expense on what is needed to bring about societal change³¹.

²⁹ On 29 March 2023, during the feedback workshop on the draft version of this discussion paper, many participants questioned the added value of IATI. Participants did not see how IATI is contributing to its alleged purpose of transparency. The dashboard is not working well. It is not clear whether the Ministry is really making use of the data. The only feedback received is when data are not delivered or if data are not delivered in the exact format required. Gathering the data is very cumbersome and time consuming, also for Southern partners. The basket indicators are difficult to comprehend and hard to explain to the consortium partners (North and South). Establishing baselines for the basket indicators was difficult. Furthermore, some of the data concerns sensitive issues that partners are hesitant to share. The effort and time spent on IATI is disproportionate to the benefits.

³⁰ Cf. [Rethinking MEL: A guide for a feminist approach](#)

³¹ See [IOB Criteria Specific recommendations by the Power Up! Consortium](#)

Methods for data collection do not always need the scientific rigor required in the most prestigious academic journals. What is important is to get a better understanding of the relationship between the intervention and its effects. Therefore, many partnerships look at outcome harvesting and more participatory methods, such as feminist MEL³².

8. M&E means a big-time investment at the cost of attention for the 'real work' in programme implementation. It implies extra resources to hire specialist staff, without availability of specific budget allocations for this purpose. M&E is experienced to serve mainly funder accountability purposes: 'the method decides the change, while the change should decide the method'. More qualitative reporting instead of reporting numbers is considered key. Communities should be involved in this process. Now, the reporting is often so complex that it is taken care off by the Southern CSOs, on behalf of the communities, whilst it should be done with them. Generally, it is regretted that intersectional learning between partnerships is not facilitated in the current framework.'

It is furthermore recommended:

- To evaluate whether the time, effort and costs being spent on reporting data in the IATI system is proportionate to the benefits and whether there are better alternatives.
- To rethink the IOB criteria for evaluating programs and to reassess what counts as "quality" evaluation and by whom³³.

³² Ibid.

³³ [Rethinking MEL: A guide for a feminist approach](#)