



A Different Story

20 Years of international cooperation



Samen
Werkt.

A vision for global change

When Partos was founded twenty years ago, we were driven by a deep sense of optimism. By unifying a group of organisations within the Dutch field of development cooperation under one common goal, we believed the potential for our impact would be enhanced far beyond the abilities of each individual organisation. That increased impact would lead to a significant contribution to our global goals rooted in justice, equity, and peace. Our vision was bold, but it reflected the spirit of the time. But without preaching defeat, I think it is fair to say that our optimism has proven premature.

Those working in the field of international development are familiar with a paradox: our mission is, ultimately, to make ourselves obsolete. The world towards which we work is one without poverty, hunger, or inequality, where wealth and resources are shared equitably, and human rights are universally upheld. In such a world, our work, as it currently operates, would no longer be needed.

In practice, however, this ideal remains an aspiration. The reality is that our work has never been more urgent or necessary. We have seen worsening inequality, autocrats gaining power, environmental crises neglected, and the ongoing impacts of systemic injustice. These challenges render organisations such as Partos and our network of members indispensable. Far from being obsolete, we are at the heart of addressing these complex and evolving global issues.

Yet, over time, we have come to view our work through a different lens. We have realised that building this world isn't simply about addressing and eradicating current challenges; it is about testing and refining the methods for how our ideal world might be upheld in perpetuity. A fair and equitable world will require ongoing solidarity, reflexivity, and adaptability to shifting circumstances. In this sense, rather than working toward a future where we are obsolete, we are laying the groundwork for how that future can endure.

This perspective highlights the progress we have made over the last two decades in a new light; as an organisation founded on the principles of solidarity and collaboration, Partos has witnessed, been part of, and actively promoted a series of transformations within our sector. We have seen the shift from charity to global solidarity, signified by international agreement to move away from the one-sided framing of the Millennium Development Goals, and towards a framework of shared responsibility in the Sustainable Development Goals. Our approach has evolved from a top-down approach into dynamic models that support locally-led changes through a stronger focus on equal partnerships. We have moved beyond addressing symptoms and towards addressing systemic change. These shifts have not only defined the sector as it is today, but have also been shaped, in part, by the work we have done over the past two decades.

Exactly what role, then, has Partos played in this journey? To answer that, we need to take a closer look at our history.

A catalyst for change

In the early 2000s, our sector was quietly transforming. A new sense of global solidarity was on the rise, more focused on pragmatism than ethical frameworks informed by traditional ideologies. The Ministry focused its funding increasingly on collaboration and evidence-based approaches, and the idea that Dutch trade interests were served by supporting emerging economies took hold. When Partos was founded in 2004, The Netherlands was still a proud leader in international development cooperation.

Partos was founded in response to that growing need in our sector: the call for greater cooperation and a pragmatic focus on impact. Our idea was simple, yet novel: the collective is greater than the sum of the parts. When our organisation first started, we represented 60 passionate member organisations, each deeply committed to their own area of expertise.

From our outset, solidarity was the cornerstone of our mission. Our challenge was to explore innovative ways to foster collaboration, while our members continued their work in their specialised fields. These early years were a period of experimentation and growth, during which we consistently refined our approach as we navigated the complexities of working collectively.

It took time, dialogue, and trust to recognise one another's strengths. Within five years, our organisation had already grown substantially. New members joined, others merged or entered into structural collaborations to strengthen their impact. And as we came together, so too did our capacity to make a lasting impact.

Shaping the Sector: what we have achieved

One of the challenges that we recognised early on was the need to ensure that the core values of the sector were also upheld internally. This included, for example, fostering transparency in how the funds entrusted to us were properly managed. To address this, Partos has taken on an overarching role in supporting its members. To this day, we offer support in creating Codes of Conduct, in drafting and implementing policies on diversity, equity and inclusion; and we offer training on these topics.

Meanwhile, it had become clear that for sustainable international development, it is imperative to consider policy coherence– one that extends beyond the work of NGOs alone. For instance, trade policies should not undermine the objectives of development policies and international cooperation. Business investments should support and enhance changes towards internationally agreed development goals. National and foreign policies, in turn, should be coherent in their pursuit of sustainable global development. In this context, Partos, alongside Foundation Max van der Stoel and Woord en Daad, has coordinated coherence between sectors: politics, policy and even businesses. Initiatives such as our 'Building Change' partnership, which advocates for improved coordination around certain themes, were paramount in changing the way that The Netherlands approaches these important issues. Today, policy coherence has a firm place on the Dutch political agenda.

Meanwhile, we worked on expanding our network, partnering with international organisations. Our focus was not simply on growing our membership, but on building a platform that reflected the diverse voices within the sector, ensuring that these voices were central in our work.

Our diverse network also enables us to identify and champion issues that are overlooked. Our work on decolonisation has resulted in the creation of a wealth of resources, inciting a shift in orientation for many of our members and partners. We continue to advocate for an approach to communication in our sector that is grounded in self-reflection.

Our work has not been done in isolation; we are shaped by our diverse and growing network and their incredible efforts, which have been instrumental in driving key initiatives that span across multiple countries and themes. Together with members and partners, we have successfully unified our efforts to support crucial agendas on shifting power, decolonisation, inclusion, and climate justice.

Redefining power: our ongoing journey

As we reflect on our history, it is clear that our success has been marked by continuous adaptation, embracing new ideas, and prioritising solidarity. Our innovation festivals, for example, focused on celebrations of the strides made in international development, particularly those achieved through collective action.

One much-needed change is steadily taking root: the dismantling of the hold that inequitable power structures have on our global systems. The attitudes and power imbalances that we have inherited from our colonial pasts serve to keep the Majority World in a position of dependency. This limits the potential for equitable collaboration.

Given our central position in the Dutch field of international development, we felt responsible to take on the challenge of Shifting the Power and decolonising development. Through Communities of Practice, research, and collaboration, we gained a better understanding of how power: what it is, the dynamics of power within our sector, and how it can be more equitably distributed.

As we reflect on the obstacles and accomplishments of the last two decades, and as we look forward to the growing number of challenges we are facing today, we once again ask the question: what is Partos' role in all this? Over the past 20 years, we have been proud to champion changes that have redefined our sector. We listen to our stakeholders and amplify underrepresented voices, so we can determine which changes are needed—to organise the thinking that is required—to lobby for the policies that will catalyse these changes, and to support our members in their implementation.

The road ahead

Today, however, international solidarity is increasingly under pressure. It is becoming more challenging to convince the world that global collaboration on sustainable development is a crucial component of any possible solution to current global crises. Our efforts to decolonise, diversify, and include are at odds with the prevailing political climate—in our country and globally. Misinformation, one-liners, and divisive rhetoric gain far more traction than a nuanced story about systemic change, about dismantling power structure and climate justice.

So, where do we go from here? The narrative around global citizenship is being reshaped, encouraging individuals and organisations to see themselves as part of a larger global community with shared responsibilities. As civil society organisations working on global justice, we continue to organise together. In our globalised world, there isn't a single country that doesn't depend on other countries. Our world is intricately connected through trade and the rippling effects of politics at all levels. We have been enriched by cultures from all over the world—even if we don't realise it. Equally, the crises faced around the world are global crises, even the ones that seem local. A coup in Myanmar, for example, affects globalised value chains, impacts migration flows, and puts pressure on surrounding economies, which in turn are linked to ours. Droughts in sub-Saharan Africa, threatening hunger, equally increase the fragility of global food systems.

For centuries, we, in the West, have reaped the benefits of globalisation. We have also increasingly understood the importance of global peace and stability for our own wellbeing.

Recognising these realities means we have to adjust our expectations and rethink our approach. This is the nature of our work; it is never static. Our sector is in constant flux, requiring us to remain agile and creative in the face of emerging challenges. As we navigate this landscape, we are reminded that our strength lies in collaboration; our ability to come together, share insights, and leverage our collective impact, is essential in creating that world toward which we work.

For this, we need one another now more than ever to help counteract the forces against us and to drive this change forward!

There is work to be done—and we are ready to continue doing it, today, tomorrow and for the next twenty years!